

**For Whom the Digital Bell Tolls: Persona, the Self, and the Mourning of  
Musicians on Social Media Sites**

by

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## Abstract

This thesis examines how the mourning of popular music artists occurs on social media sites. It argues that online spaces inform and uncover new ways for people to mourn the musical artists that have contoured their lives and that, in mourning these artists, audiences are really mourning themselves.

The project explores and analyses the data from two social media sites – Reddit and Instagram – and the posts, photographs, and drawings harvested from these sites in the immediate twenty-four hours after the death of three artists: David Bowie, George Michael and Leonard Cohen. The death of each artist is framed through discussions of their persona both within their earlier lives and in the period before their deaths. These personas are then discussed in conjunction with three different conceptual and analytical areas of focus: Narrative, Evocative Objects and Photographs.

The thesis is split into five chapters. The first considers how different theorists have constructed, examined and understood mourning in the 20th century and how this manifests on social media in the 21st century. The second chapter considers how David Bowie's death was discussed on Reddit, and the narratives of mourning that arose with these posts. The third chapter details the ways George Michael's death was presented on Instagram, and how sites of mourning are remediated. The fourth chapter considers how photographs were used whilst mourning Leonard Cohen, and how words and music converge in online depictions of mourning. The final section details how the social media poster is located at the centre of the mourning process and how the analytical data proves that the mourners are mourning a part of themselves.

By considering how these artists are mourned on social media sites, we can understand the ways technology has shaped, informed and, at times, changed how we mourn in the 21st century.

*Dedicated to Valentine Campana Torres*

*the ever-present light of my life.*

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For ease of reading, images are labelled with their corresponding Figures and presented at the end of the chapter in which they are referenced.

Each man's death diminishes me,

For I am involved in mankind.

Therefore, send not to know

For whom the bell tolls,

It tolls for thee.

John Donne

*For Whom the Bell Tolls/No Man is an Island*

# Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction: For Whom the Bell Tolls

Death touches us all. It ascribes itself onto our daily lives in a myriad of ways, through the people we love, the celebrities we follow, or even the politicians and public figures that have informed our society. With death comes mourning. It is a natural response to loss, as our memories of the lost, their objects, and the traces they left behind provide the focus of our attention. This thesis aims to consider how the most naturalistic of human tendencies, to mourn, comes into contact with the technology of today. Technology underpins every aspect of our lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, with our business, social, and entertainment needs met through numerous technological solutions. Social media is at the centre of these technology advancements; it has altered us all, it has changed how we engage with our daily, social, and work lives, and how we exist within society. Thus, it stands to reason that social media has meaningfully and irreversibly changed the ways in which we engage with death and the subsequent mourning which arises from this. The following project utilises critical theory, textual analysis, and digital ethnography to consider how, and indeed why, we mourn on these social media sites. This thesis threads these fields together, touching on different ideas and materials throughout.

When I started this thesis, 2016 was the *fandom annus horribilis*, the year considered to have been the worst for celebrity deaths (BBC, 2016a). My previous work on nostalgia, popular music, and media made me think about this reaction and the theoretical implications this loss had upon the mourner, with the artist representing a past to them which is now lost. With this in mind I took to social media to see what others were thinking, feeling, and posting in the aftermath of the deaths we saw in 2016. This highlighted how social media sites seemed to be the first port of call for those wanting information, to mourn, and to consume that artist's content. 2016 has now been somewhat overshadowed in our social memory by the covid-19 pandemic and the collective trauma that arose with

this. However, when we consider the celebrities we lost in that year, it is still stark to see the number of significant cultural figures who died. They include:

David Bowie, Terry Wogan, Alan Rickman, Harper Lee, Prince, Victoria Wood, Ronnie Corbett, Carrie Fisher, George Michael, Fidel Castro, Gene Wilder, Nancy Reagan, George Martin, Leonard Cohen, Merle Haggard, Greg Lake, Glenn Frey, Rick Parfitt, Leon Russell, Dave Swarbrick, Zsa Zsa Gabor, and many more (BBC, 2016b)

This is reinforced further when we consider just the musicians lost in 2016. Multiple media companies dubbed it 'The Year the Music Died' (Fantz, 2016; Hunter-Tilney, 2016), placing emphasis on the musicians we lost that year over the other celebrities who died. This thesis aims to create a dialogue between the world of social media, fandom, and music, considering how mourning was enacted in 2016 on these social media sites, with a focus on musicians.

My research is focused on three of the musicians who died in 2016: David Bowie, Leonard Cohen, and George Michael. I wanted to consider these musicians because they are the ones that most personally resonated with me, whilst also offering a spectrum of unique insights into genre, style, image, and persona. The following chapters are dedicated to these three artists and how they were mourned in the space of social media.

My main research question is:

What can social media coverage of the deaths of musicians tell us about collective mourning and the mourner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This leads to several subsidiary questions:

- How are musicians mourned on social media sites?
- How do the personas of both the mourner and the dead interact?
- Where does the mourner sit within these mourning practices?
- How do objects of mourning manifest themselves on these sites?

It is by asking these questions that I hope to discover how mourning is manifested in the 21<sup>st</sup> century social media space. At the centre of these questions, insight will be found into not just how the artists are mourned, but also how the concept of the self has been informed and changed by social media and death.

The forthcoming chapters are split into two sections, with this one (the Introduction), and the following chapter ‘Theories of Mourning’ acting as literature reviews, giving substance to the remaining four chapters which deal with first-hand analysis of social media materials. These four chapters each focus on a different artist’s persona, with the final one pulling focus onto the mourner. Within these chapters I highlight a core aspect or display of the mourning process, and consider how these manifested in the immediate mourning period after the musician’s death. A full synopsis of each chapter appears at the end of this introduction. The role of this introduction is to lay the foundation for the rest of the thesis by discussing the field of popular music and mourning, the sphere of social media as a theoretical space, and by developing key words which will appear within the rest of the thesis.

I have consciously looked at Reddit and Instagram as my main resources as these have been the most underdeveloped and unexplored sites in terms of mourning research, with an overwhelming amount of work focusing on Twitter (Blight et al., 2017; Click et al., 2013; Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014; Pittman & Reich, 2016; Van den Bulck & Larsson, 2019) and Facebook (Moyer & Enck, 2020; Lambert, 2013; Giaxoglou, 2015; Church, 2013; Kern et al., 2013; Rossetto et al., 2015; Willis & Ferrucci, 2017; Degroot, 2012). As such, both Reddit and Instagram hold a wealth of unexplored ideas and information that can benefit from close reading, with Reddit especially underserved by the academic community. Ultimately this will take this research into different directions and traverse the multimedia landscape of social media sites, from the heavily text-based format of Reddit to the predominately visual aspects of Instagram. It is my belief that by focusing on these two distinct social media sites, we can draw a golden thread through the concept of mourning, the self, and the way we mourn today.

## **1.2 Popular Music and Mourning**

Popular musicians have a long and complicated relationship with death; from the plane crashes that took the lives of Buddy Holly and Patsy Cline, to the mythical reinforcement of tropes such as the 27 Club and Rock ‘n’ Roll hedonism. This relationship has become more

pertinent through the evolution of Popular Music Studies, as the earlier work on teenage youth culture has come into conflict with the aging demographics and geriatric pop stars. Popular music has had to grapple with the existential demise of its foundational figures, with the energetic youth culture described in earlier scholarship having to come to terms with growing old. This section briefly discusses the scholarship on popular musicians and death, and where this thesis sits within these materials and ideas.

One of the key texts in popular music and death was by the journalist and author Greil Marcus: *Dead Elvis* (1991). It concentrates on the long cultural tail of Elvis and how his legacy has shifted through the years after his death. Marcus draws comparisons with the cultural legacy of Elvis and American culture overall, linking in key aspects of American cultural life within the sphere of Elvis' work. Elvis, within this work, is the spectre that haunts America's culture. Marcus manages to bring in some of the unsavoury aspects of Elvis' character, but dwells too much on what it is like to be a fan of the artist who carries with him so much cultural baggage. However, Marcus at times fails to separate himself from the cultural products he is discussing, which is at times a strength but proceeds to undermine some of the work Marcus does. As a foundational text in popular music and death however, it is integral in understanding the malleable nature of how the posthumous image of the artist is, and can be, engrained within western cultures.

Gilbert Rodman expands on the work of Marcus with his book *Elvis After Elvis* (1996), offering a space in which we can view the artists as still existing in some sense after their deaths. By discussing the places associated with Elvis, Rodman manages to make the examples of Elvis' cultural baggage more concrete in physical places and objects. This allows us to see how even though the physical body of Elvis has gone, his legacy still manifests itself in places such as Graceland and Las Vegas. Here we can see where the fan cultures and the cultural legacy of the artist intersect, with these physical spaces giving fans places in which their fandom can be articulated together in a pre-Internet age. Due to when this book was written, we have to view this as a period piece of scholarship, with some interesting ideas about the use of mythology and the cultural legacy useful to us now but lacking any real relationship to the mass mediated Internet age. Both this book and Marcus' work allows us to see how popular music and death intersect but lacks any insight into how we now interact with media and the legacy of artists in the Internet age.

The edited book *Afterlife as Afterimage* (2005) by Steven Jones and Joli Jensen is one of the first works to tackle the overall picture of posthumous fame and how death modifies the fan-to-artist relationship. Here they outline the central nature of the fan in the mourning process, allowing us to see how these artists are mourned through a complex mixture of fan-to-fan interactions and engagement with mediated objects. The edited volume *Death and the Rock Star* (2015) edited by Catherine Strong and Barbara Lebrun brings Jones and Jensen's work into the post-Internet age. This edited collection highlights how the space of social media is a space that is used to engage with other fans following the death of a musician. Here we see literature beginning to frame famous musician's death inside of Web 2.0 technologies, with the fan operating at the centre. These chapters give form to how social media, fandom, and the posthumous identity of the artist interact, with the focus shifting to the production of fan-to-fan engagement. This is integral to understanding how the sharing of news, ideas, and material has changed in the immediate posthumous moment. This is particularly clear in the chapter by Susan Fast in which she discusses narrative and Michael Jackson, and the counter-narratives that can arise with the death of the artist. However, by focusing on an edited collection of smaller chapters, there is less of a chance to hone in on one aspect of the mourning process. There is also an over reliance on film, television, radio, and Twitter, which indeed is important to understand, but has less cultural relevance than it used to.

Moving away from popular music focused literature, I am indebted to the emerging field of persona studies and the work of P. David Marshall, Kim Barbour, and Philip Auslander for this whole thesis. I was fortunate to attend and present at the inaugural Persona Studies conference at Newcastle University. The concept of persona has allowed my work to link together disparate ideas of the self, the artist, and social media, and has provided the theoretical backbone to my analysis chapters. An understanding of persona is integral to considering how we operate online, from the constructed artifice of our social media selves, to the consuming of artists' content. It is important to consider 'that personas are the material forms of public selfhood, even when entirely composed of digital objects, network connections and mediated expressions' (Marshall & Barbour, 2015, p. 290). As such, all of our engagement online is underpinned and can be theorised through the concept of persona, with the artist allowing our own personas to be 'authorised and legitimised by the

process of identification that takes place in the circulation of meanings between our representative artists and us' (Elliott, 2019, p. 27). Ultimately, persona acts as a fibre through which all of the following work hinges, allowing me to understand how the self is constructed within the online space.

This thesis addresses some of the gaps found in *Death and the Rock Star* and the other works cited before, bringing these concepts into the realm of persona studies. Scholarship has been, and in some cases still is, heavily focused on Twitter as the platform previously allowed for academics to access data easily and at will. This gives us insight into the initial ideas of popular musicians, the Internet, and mourning (such as the organising of fans and controlling of narratives), but lacks the scope and breadth to argue that it can and does happen the same way on other social media platforms. This thesis sits at the intersection of all of these texts, but by looking at elements left behind by the fans in the spaces of two social media sites, it expands the focus and is able to draw more concrete conclusions than a singular artist study or one focused on just Twitter. Ultimately, this will give a more incisive and complex look into popular musicians and death, building on this previous literature and persona studies, but offering a more comprehensive and insightful view of fan Internet cultures and mourning.

### **1.3 Situating Time, Narrative, Memory, and Mourning**

Time is a relative concept. It is defined by cultural context, personal experience, and geographical location. Castells states that 'all time, in nature as in society, seems to be specific to a given context: time is local' (Castells, 2010, p. 460). Time 'is not a given and neutral phenomenon...it is moulded, grasped and transformed in various ways' (Christensen & Willerslev, 2013, p. 461). Our conception of time, in the western world, is an amalgamation of history, technology, and society, building on multitudes of temporal experiences from 'Babylonian horoscopes, to the Newtonian revolution of absolute time' (ibid). Any discussion of time needs to be established in specific historical and cultural moments. For this piece, the historical moment is the now, the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the cultural moment is the space of the Internet and social media. In the following pages, I will discuss

the scholarship on time in the digital sphere, and in the process, build a critical understanding of the ways in which time is constructed in our mediated world.

### **1.3.1 Time and the Internet**

James Gleick, in his book *Faster: The Acceleration of Just About Everything*, claims that 'just about everything' (1999, p. 464) in our societies has been accelerated in an effort to compress time. Our temporal world changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries via technology; the telegram, the plane, the telephone, all resulted in an immediacy of presence. Marshall McLuhan wrote in the late 1960s that mediated technologies 'abolish space and time' (McLuhan, 1964, p. 170) and shrink our worlds. Paul Virilio argues this further, claiming that the development of multi-media practices has resulted in the 'acceleration of all reality: of things, living beings, socio-cultural phenomena' (2005, p. 117). The technologies of mass mediatisation, the television, the satellite, the computer, have systematically quickened our lives. Time as we knew it, to use McLuhan, was abolished. This is particularly pertinent when we consider the idea of presence. Time, in this context, is knowing about and being present in situations previously separated by distance. Time quickened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but only as an instance of live engagement. You could talk on the phone to someone a thousand miles away but couldn't see them, or engage with them, outside of the liveness of the phone call. Live presence repeatedly gave the illusion that there were more hours in the day, resulting in faster connections and consumption possibilities. The rise of the Internet has deconstructed this further through our networked society and the prevalence of mediated technologies.

If the previous century was defined by a faster pace of multiple communication technologies, then the current one can be defined by the pace of only one: the Internet. We have witnessed a compression of previous times, giving rise to competing notions of what time can be. These competing notions continue when we consider the ways in which the Internet has splintered this time. In the 1990s there was an effort to define a dominant 'Internet time,' a concept first introduced by Swatch with their 'Biel Meantime (BMT) as a universal reference... which proclaims a universal or absolute time for everyone in every

place' (Weltevreden et al., 2014, p. 126). The aim was to navigate the fact that 'cyberspace has no seasons and no night and day... Internet time is absolute time for everybody', as 'in the future, for many people, real time will be Internet time' (Nickell, 1998, n.p.). As the Internet seemed to exist in a separate time, and place than our everyday lives, this concept seemed to make sense. Ultimately, a universal time for everyone in this technologically constructed space could unite us.

The Internet produces a sense of distinct time; however, this has been complicated by the establishment of Web 2.0 technologies and platforms. The past twenty years have seen a shift from a static Internet, seen in Web 1.0, to one of engagement and mutual construction of content, in Web 2.0. Initially the Internet, Web 1.0, 'was characterised by a structure of the production and consumption of content which was very similar to the broadcast model' (Hunsinger & Senft, 2014, p. 1). This changed when engagement with complex technologies started to become the norm for people through their leisure and professional activities. Via cheaper, faster, and user-engagement-minded Internet platforms, people started to integrate social media and the Internet into their everyday lives. Ultimately, we began moving our social activities to the Internet space. Castells calls this concept 'timeless time' (Castells, 2010, p. 465); this is time which has been so compressed and deconstructed by technology that it is existing outside our predominant notions of what time is or can be. Time becomes determined by the conditions of technology. What Castells calls 'timeless time' is the 'emerging, dominant form of social time in the networked society' (ibid), where 'domination is exercised through...people in different temporal and spatial frames' (ibid). Therefore, we can see that time on the Internet is a fractured space, where no dominating time-scape exists.

Instead of a dominant 'Internet time,' there instead exists a multitude of different times on the Internet. Through these different temporalities, engagement with the past is possible. You can receive a message, a call, or a photo from a deceased loved one days, even weeks, after their death. People operate within different spheres of time in the online world, experiencing time differently, and engaging with these technologies in their own unique timeframes. Internet time is better categorised as Internet time(s). However, not all temporalities are created equally. This concept of time negates the ways in which technology punctuates our everyday lives. When considering the Internet as a selection of

different temporalities, it needs to be understood that these co-exist in a complex mix of differing priorities of commercialisation and personal use. These different temporalities extend over one another and create thick layers of time, which overlap and intersect. Internet companies have tried to circumvent this by prioritising an organisational approach to their platforms through their emphasis on the concept ‘real-time.’ They use this as a way of describing which temporalities they are privileging over others, underpinned by ‘live’ information gathering and archiving. If, as previously stated, multiple temporalities exist on the Internet, how do we, or more importantly Internet companies, distinguish between them? This is primarily achieved through the ranking of information presented; the freshest content is given priority over content which is older; it is in this ranking exercise where real-time, and not chronological time, is established and reinforced.

Real-time needs to be further defined at this point. In computing it is described as ‘the way in which a computer system receives data and then communicates it or makes it available immediately’ (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). It can be ‘used to describe media characterised by fresh, dynamic or continuously processed content in opposition to static or archival media’ (Weltevrede et al., 2014, p. 126). There is both the illusion of immediacy and a continuous flow of content on Web 2.0 platforms, which are existing in different temporalities. The ‘term real-time Web was coined to describe the exploding number of live activities online, from tweets to status updates on Facebook to the sharing of news, Web links, and videos on other sites’ (Weltevrede et al., 2014). There was a shift from the passive nature of the Internet, in its early form, to the active presence reinforced by Web platforms. Time is still fractured here, but the reliance on real-time engagement structures Internet use as a continuation of time in the everyday. As Robert Gehl states, ‘the new is privileged and on top. To follow threads of discussion, one must click through pages of comments and attempt to reconstruct a conversation back through time’ (2011, p. 1232). This is exemplified by Twitter asking, ‘what is happening?’ as a prompt on its front page, and Facebook asking, ‘what’s on your mind?’ These prompts deliberately position these sites in the *now*, they ‘ask the user of these social media sites to react, to present his or her current ‘status’: I’m happy, I’m going to the airport, I’m listening to Radiohead’ (ibid). Castell’s ‘timeless time’ fails at this point. Emphasis has shifted on these platforms to the present as we integrate them as an extension of our lives, via our engagement with the *now*.

Social media continually reinforces the personalisation of online space. The prompts by these platforms curate a space for the user to express their own views, create their own content, and engage with others. This structures the online space as one of digital and affective labour, personalising these platforms while at the same time creating the content others are consuming. Your ‘timeline’ is an intrinsically personal space, you choose who you follow, and you choose how to use the tools given to you by these platforms. There is an illusion of personal time created in these acts of labour and consumption. We are told that these spaces are our own, allowing us to feel personally linked to these platforms constructed from our social circle and our own thoughts. This creates a time which is felt to be deeply personal, it reflects your social space, your everyday life, your lived experiences. Real-time reinforces this notion by encouraging and reinforcing ‘fresh’ content, continually reinstating the need to engage with the *now*. Through real-time structuring of platforms, the latest and freshest content is presented to the user first. Ultimately, an illusion of time is created where you continually feel connected through fresh content appearing on your social media feeds, with Internet time existing as a continuation of the lived and everyday present. This creates a ‘persistent connection between [the] server and the user’ (Weltevreden et al., 2014, p. 134) where time is not fractured but where these platforms are an extension of the everyday lived time of the users. It is possible to see that these Websites are set up to create an instant reaction to the events of the *now*. This throws into question what happens when the *now* is in continual temporal flux.

Barker sees the unfolding of the *now* as a tension between data existing in the past, while we engage with the present. Platforms ‘don’t just exist in a digital space somehow sitting out of time’ instead they are in ‘continuous contact with our experiences *in* [sic] time’ (Barker, 2012, p. 19). This is time ‘produced in our day-to-day lives’ which interacts with ‘digitally preserved data [in the] past, an accumulation of passing presents digitally preserved, that at points become synthesized in this present’ (*ibid*). Ultimately, when we consider this, we unearth a tension in the temporality of the Internet, what time(s) do we engage with and how? Web 2.0 has been the catalyst to this restructuring of time. Gehl states that sites such as Facebook and Twitter are constructed with ‘speed, the new, and immediacy’ (*ibid*) at their heart. However, this creates tension with the archival nature of these platforms. This is personified, as Gehl points out, by our relation to the Internet as a

space. It has become jarring to us to realise that the Internet must exist as a physical space, a space ‘comprised of vast server farms, rooms of computers humming away’ (Gehl, 2011, p. 1229), where the archive of our pasts is both stored and created. The Internet therefore must both exist as an immediate present, via everyday media engagement and platforms, while also being constructed as an archive and archival space. This is referred to, in technology studies, as the ‘front and back end’ of the Internet (Smith, 2012).

The ‘front and back end’ is used to highlight the ways in which technology companies organise their social platforms and the vast amount of data they create. As discussed previously, they are deeply personalised spaces, which give both the illusion of personal time but also autonomy and curation. Social media platforms should be considered as a deeply layered, but forward-facing social space in time. The front end is characterised as the Web-design layer, the user facing ‘skin’ of the platform; it is the layer the user engages with. The back end in contrast, is the accidental archive which underpins, and defines, these platforms as unique spaces. Tension, through the idea of time, lies in this distinction. A great majority of our interactions with social media is with the ‘fresh’ content being produced. However, there is always the presence of past content which exists as a constant reference point for both the technology companies and ourselves. As a result, we are continually coming into conflict with a past version of the ‘self’ who lives in this archive, destabilising our real-time engagement with the platform. The embodiment of this tension is the current practice of background checking public figures through their past social media posts and confronting them with this archive.

We are rereading our diaries from years before and encountering past versions of ourselves. As such, the present becomes lived through overlapping layers of time and the past. Whilst engaging with the ‘front ends’ of the platform, we are systematically faced with the archival ‘back end,’ which interrupts our present. Therefore, we are engaging with multiple presents, pasts and even futures at the same time. While these platforms construct the illusion of personalisation, built around attention and fresh content, they also survive on grabbing and holding our attention. This attention economy is underpinned by the fresh content presented, and created, by us, but also survives by showing people unique glimpses of their past selves. The unveiling of these past selves creates unique temporalities on these platforms while also creating an intense personal relationship to the platforms which allow

this to happen. These interactions and contradictions are therefore determined by the platforms we are interacting with.

### ***1.3.2 Memory, Mourning, and Narrative***

Social media acts as a space where different times exist within a continuum of engagement. The concepts of time, memory, narrative, and mourning are intrinsically linked with each other, and with our conception of what it is to be human. For the purpose of the rest of this thesis, it would be beneficial to position how narrative, memory, and mourning are intertwined. Within this next section, I am going to very briefly consider these relationships, however, these are discussed and talked about in length in Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Three, and Chapter Four of this thesis.

Memory is at the root of what makes us human. Our lives, media, and engagement with others are built on our conception and understanding of memory. However, just as it has with the concept of time, social media has problematised and externalised our ideas of memory. Memories are 'a transindividual or collective phenomena' (Brockmeier, 2010, p. 6) built upon a shared understanding of cultural creations and societal norms. These are underpinned and exercised through the narratives we have told ourselves as a society. These narratives are stories that exist as humans' 'most advanced means of contextualising propositions, ideas, memories, and ourselves' (ibid, p. 16).

These concepts are intrinsically linked to our understanding of who and what we are. These narratives, and following this, our memories, are consumed through media representations as media allows for the continuous 'flow of actions, narratives, images, and other texts from one generation to the next' (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 18). We can infer that social media is a continuation of this mediated narrative deployment as we learn from these narratives and use them to remember who we are as a people. Different conceptions of time have problematised our ideas of presence. The inverse of this however, is that social media and the collapsing of time has further linked our ideas of narrative and memory, as these are 'essential in connecting others of discourse and symbolic mediation and integrating them

into the symbolic space of a culture' (ibid, p. 28). This link and the complex ways in which narratives, and consequently memories, are integrated and observed on social media sites is the main thrust of Chapter Two and discussed at length there.

The mediated text in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries acts as the perpetrator of narratives, highlighting 'narrative's relations to emotional affect, memory, [and] the psyche' (Meese et. Al., 2015, p. 416). As such, narratives do not exist within a vacuum, they are built by texts informed by the 'historical circumstances through which the meaning of [these] texts are mediated, interpreted, and contested.' (Negus, 2012, p. 370). This means that narratives are constructed through the mediated texts we consume, whether that is a television show, music, or our friend's social media posts. The nature of time on social media means that these narratives are constructed through our mediated memories, through our engagement with our past-selves, and through the mediated fragments left behind by others. Thus, narrative and memory are constructed through the mediated sphere of the social media platform whereupon we engage with multiple texts with the 'stories we tell about our experiences, observations, and imaginings [not able to] be comprehended and constrained within or by any one text' (Negus, 2012, p. 390).

Mourning is one of the essential links between 'narrative and life' (Compagnon, 2016, p. 209), as the posthumous moment gives rise to narratives of our lives, deaths, and legacies. Within these moments mourning is a form of both memory and narrative construction, something which is discussed at length in Chapter One of this thesis. As such, 'mourning is the perfect illustration of the connection between narrative and time' (Compagnon, 2016, p. 211) as it materialises our ideas of what is and is not memory and narrative. It forces us to produce a narrative of the life of others with the fragments and materials we are left behind with. Margret Gibson summarises this position by stating that:

'the death of significant others (personally known loved ones) or significant figures of history and identity, transforms the past into pure memory. The narrative experience of continuity or blending between past, present and future is ruptured by significant deaths' (Gibson, 2007, p. 421)

Time, memory, and narrative are all linked within the process of mourning, as we use the left behind mediated forms of the dead to construct the narrative and memory of their

passing. This is especially pertinent in our temporally fragmented world of social media, where the idea of presence and the dead is problematised by the total recall of our mediated lives. The ways in which we interact online, and how mourning is manifested within this, is discussed at length later in this introduction, but first we must look at the fundamental structures of social media and how they facilitate engagement within these spaces.

#### **1.4 The Social Media Space and Platform Vernacular**

To put this research into focus, it would be beneficial at this point to consider social media and the development of Web 2.0. Time is a social construct, it is produced and reinforced in social contexts and groups. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we have transferred our social groups from physical spaces into the online world, through the mass adoption of social media. The power of social media cannot be overstated, it has pervaded our daily lives and has made the companies behind these platforms the biggest in the world. We can categorise social media as 'networked information services designed to support in-depth social interaction, community formation, collaborative opportunities, and collaborative work' (Hunsinger & Senft, 2014, p. 1). It is defined in opposition to previous notions of the Internet, Web 1.0, and seen as a space of static consumption similar to the 'page of a book' (O'Reilly, 2005). Social media subsequently 'arose in relation to the terms social software and Web 2.0' (ibid), as Internet platforms defined themselves through the 'architecture of participation model of engagement' (ibid). This switch between Web 1.0 and Web 2.0 can be categorised as a shift from passive to active consumption. We have moved from passively engaging with mediated networks, to actively producing the content we are consuming. We are now so entrenched in mediated networks that we can no longer escape their influence, whether that is to share family memories, keep updated on a hobby, or see the inane ramblings of the President of the United States. This has fundamentally changed our society and by looking at social media in relation to time and its use of platforms, we can begin to see how mourning is influenced in this transition.

The platform controls our access to the Internet. Whether it is a Wikipedia article, social media post, or a Google search, our interactions are governed through a platform. The term

‘Platform Vernacular’ was first suggested by Gibbs, Arnold, Meese, Nansen, and Carter as a way of ‘understanding how communication practices emerge within particular social networking services to congeal as genres’ (Gibbs et al., 2015, p. 256). To state this in plainer language, it is the rules and practices which govern social media sites and other Internet platforms. We can see this in the ways people use certain social networking services and how specific practices are dictated by the platforms themselves. For instance, Instagram centres around its use of image, Twitter focuses on words, and Facebook is a mixture of the two. Platform vernacular allows us to look at these Internet platforms as unique cultural spaces, governed by rules, which limit us to certain types of interactions, while also understanding that these spaces offer unique circumstances and challenges, from platform to platform.

Bucher and Helmond continue our understanding of platforms by relating them to the concept of ‘affordances,’ more specifically the affordances which arise in our interaction with our environment(s). The term affordance is described, by them, as a way of considering ‘what material artifacts, such as media technologies, allow people to do’ (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 3). This draws upon JJ. Gibson’s work in ecology, where ‘affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes either for good or ill’ (Gibson, 2014, p. 119). Gibson allows us to see the environments we interact with in relation to the ‘possibilities for action [they] may provide’ (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 4). To bring this back to platform vernacular, it is clear that these Internet interfaces are constructed environments, created and determined by the affordances they provide. As environments they are ‘composed of pathways and features in their own right’ (*ibid*, p. 15) whereupon ‘affordances exist for people at multiple levels and across platform boundaries’ (*ibid*, p. 15). Gibbs et. al. ‘argue that each social media platform comes with its own unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics’ (2015, p. 257). This ultimately ‘determines particular modes of expression or action’ (*ibid*) on these platforms and in the process creating the affordances of the environment. The social media platform exists as a unique environment where access is determined through the platform vernacular of each site. It is in this environment where affordance(s) are created.

To put the previous ideas into practice, let us position platform vernacular in relation to the social media site Instagram. It describes itself as a ‘simple, fun and creative way to capture,

edit and share photos, videos, and messages with friends and family' (Instagram, no date). Photographs are instilled with more importance than the accompanying text; this is reinforced through the image taking over the screen, with text relegated to small print at the bottom of each photo. This affordance has given rise to several Instagram-specific behaviours which have been transferred into our everyday lives through both engagement with this technology and the resulting cultural references this produces. One of these is the rise of the 'Instagram Boyfriend' (Hosie, 2017). While describing the phenomena, *The Independent* states that 'behind every woman's perfect Instagram shot is often a reluctant photographer boyfriend' (*ibid*). This can be widened further to Instagram girlfriend, spouse, or friend. This platform's focus on image has manifested itself into our daily lives through the behaviours it reinforces.

The everydayness of these practices is reinforced through an increasing number of other phrases that have entered our collective vocabulary, including: Instagram worthy (something is good enough to be put online); For the 'gram (we are only doing this for the photo to put online); and 'slide into their DMs.' All of this is evidence of a new lexicon developing around behaviours, which are in turn given affordance and manipulated by platforms. This has been characterised by Alice Marwick and others as 'insta-fame,' as 'Social media allow[s] "average people" to reach the broad audiences once available only to those with access to broadcast media' (Marwick, 2015, p. 157). Users of these social media platforms learn these techniques from each other, perpetuating the visual behaviours and languages unique to these sites and broadcasting themselves to others, this is something which is covered in depth in Chapter Five of this thesis.

These behaviours shape people's uses of this technology, with text-heavy posts seeming jarring to the everyday user of the platform, though this is often subverted, and text-heavy posts have become increasingly more prevalent, categorised by the rise of the 'Instagram poets' (Dionne, 2015) and their text-based photos. However, these are abnormal in the daily uses of this site and as such are still jarring to the everyday user. New modes of communication are shaped through these affordances. This is manifested in the cultural discourse surrounding the practices on the site and the social affordances these discourses create. In 2015, *Vogue* posted a list of Instagram 'rules' for its readers under the headline 'The Instagram Rules: The Good, The Bad, and The Boring' (Bloomingdale, 2015). These

included 'never post more than three photos a day' and 'if your picture gets less than eleven likes, you need to take it down because it sucks.' Although obviously being highly subjective, these 'unofficial' rules highlight how Internet platforms are not just governed by official affordances but also constructed through social interactions and mutually understood practices. These are site and culturally specific rules, a trait reinforced by the popular Reddit thread 'Old People Facebook' which highlights the inappropriate use of the platform Facebook, seen by younger users in relation to their older relatives (Reddit, 2023). Therefore, the platform as a cultural space, is one defined by both written and unwritten rules, as well as forced and created affordances, both by the platform themselves and its users through algorithms and social pressure.

Algorithms are the organisational system which underpins both the platforms and the affordances created by them. The outer layer of the platform 'addresses users differently and the possibilities for action are therefore relative to users' (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 26). These possibilities are ultimately constructed through the complex algorithms which govern these online spaces. Peter Nagy and Gina Neff state that algorithms are 'hidden affordances,' as their 'action possibilities shape our social relations and the content we see without being directly perceivable as such' (2015, p. 3). They govern the ways in which we can engage with the information we are given and even which information we see in the first place. As well as being one of the producers of pace, seen in the unfolding of temporalities discussed before, algorithms gear users 'towards the creation and maintenance of participation and engagement' (Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 29). They are the underpinning element - the beams or joists in architecture terminology - which upholds temporalities, real-time engagement, front and back end, and all of the other elements present in our engagement in social networking services. This reinstates each user's personal relationship to social media; they feel like each of their timelines are representative of themselves because it is produced as such by these underpinning algorithms.

Our personal relationship is reinforced by our own actions on these sites, as we engage with more content we are feeding into our own feeds. Through this, the algorithms of these sites construct a profile, an online personality, which is fed back into the environment of the platform. We feel like these platforms are an extension of our own self, but we have merely

constructed this past self through our own interactions and digital labour. These algorithms, therefore, also hold a crucial part in our ideas of how commercial interests are represented in these spaces. When we see an advert whilst browsing, it has been placed there by the underlying algorithm which is fed by what you engage with on these sites. This reinforces the idea that these platforms are constructed for us personally while subsequently underlining both our everyday social lives and consumption.

The power and pervasiveness of these platforms cannot be overstated. In our collective naivete we allow them complete access and control of our personal and collective data. In doing this, we have become subservient to their rules and have lost control of our own data lives. As a society we came face-to-face with this realisation through the Cambridge Analytica and Facebook scandal following both the Brexit vote and Donald Trump's election in 2016. This came to light following a yearlong investigation by the *Guardian* into the inconsistencies found in the online activities of both of these campaigns (The Guardian, 2018a). It is estimated that nearly 50 million Facebook profiles were 'harvested' for users' personal details in a bid to secure voter preference data and targeted advertising (The Guardian, 2018b). Facebook's platform gave the company access to not just the people who opted in via personality surveys, but also their 'friends' information (*The Great Hack*, 2019). This resulted in a shockwave of political and public outrage, culminating with Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg testifying in front of the American Congress to Facebook's role in the perceived data breach (Watson, 2018). However, this didn't change their practices. There were no true repercussions for these social media sites in the aftermath of this scandal and business has largely gone unchanged since. The 'great hack' has highlighted how Facebook, and other social media sites, are 'too big to fail,' as they have integrated themselves seamlessly into our everyday lives (*Can Facebook Survive?*, 2019, 17:15). Even after the Cambridge Analytica scandal, Facebook still holds a monopoly on personal interactions and has largely not changed its practices. We know what these platforms are doing, yet we continue to engage with them because everyone else does. Theodore Adorno claimed that the 'triumph of advertising...is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them' (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002, p. 156). The 'triumph' of social media, therefore, lies in the way we accept the platform's power over us,

as the price we have to pay for the continual link to our social circles. We ‘see through them’ but we continue to engage with them, because we want to stay connected.

The Internet can be conceived as existing in a unique temporality in people’s everyday lives. However, it has been possible to see that the Internet is a complex mix of competing temporalities. There exists, within this, a field of possibilities, structured through competing presences and motives via algorithmic affordances. We can only engage with the time the Internet platforms structure for us through the affordances they create. Time online is constructed by our increasing use of both Web 2.0 platforms and a reliance on real-time computing technologies. Time in the digital, as a result, is fractured and presents itself as a multitude of different strands, while also being structured through platforms which privilege the immediate. This is exemplified by the tension between the ‘front’ and ‘back’ end of social media platforms. On the immediate surface, time is a continual flow of information, prompting instant engagement, and placing emphasis on the new. But these immediate engagements are recorded in an archive of the moment. We find ourselves existing in the *now* of these platforms but are continually faced with an archive of our pasts. Platforms construct, determine, and maintain our connection to the online world. As such, they govern our behaviours on these online spaces. We can only use these technologies in the ways in which they are afforded to us, although this has been subverted in some instances listed above. This ‘platform vernacular’ underlines our interactions with social media sites, constructing new social norms in the wake of these affordances.

I would argue that a new term is needed at this point to tie together the concept of time and the unique behaviours constructed on these sites by the platforms themselves. I call this ‘platform time’. Platform time includes all the previous examples of time and the Internet, but additionally considers the unique time constructed on platforms, particularly through the real-time/ front end and the archive/ back end of these technologies. Time is constructed by these platforms. They continually show new content but also allow for glimpses of the archive hiding underneath Facebook’s ‘on this day’ is a prime example of this. A new term is needed because we have failed to link the concept of time with the affordances these platforms create and how each platform exists in its own temporal and behavioural context. Instagram’s platform time will be different to that of Twitter and Facebook, and vice versa. An example of this is the ways in which some of these sites

repeatedly prioritise ‘hot posts’ over the continually ‘fresh’ content. We are slaves to the time which these platforms construct for us; as such, we are merely bystanders in this relationship, while being given the illusion of freedom, as highlighted by the Cambridge Analytica scandal. Although all these platforms place emphasis on their real-time credentials, it is subject, culturally, and temporally specific. Even if we were to follow the same people on social media, we would see a different platform time enacted on our respective timelines.

Platform time allows for these contradictions to exist together. Platforms both exist in a self-constructed present and a past which is continually in a state of flux. Platform time allows us to see that these are artificially constructed temporalities, governed by our engagement with these platforms, and filtered through the behaviours they create and maintain. We can bring the concept of mourning in at this point. As mentioned previously, mourning is a process of time, meaning that mourning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is constructed and engaged with in these digitally maintained temporalities, enacted and reinforced through social media platforms. Platform time allows us to consider how mourning can at once be an immediately experienced event of front-end engagement with the constructed present, while also existing in an archive able to be experienced weeks, months, even years after the initial event. This is further complicated by the actions of the governing algorithms in these spaces, continually in conflict with commercial motives, personal views, and the perceived needs of the user. Platform time highlights this ambiguity, showing us that time is both deeply personal and artificially constructed by commercial interests on these platforms. However, we can only engage with the platforms which are given to us. Platform time is an amalgamation of all the previously discussed concepts of time, platform vernacular, and the written and unwritten rules which govern these spaces.

### **1.5 Platform Vernacular of Reddit and Instagram.**

Going forward Reddit will be used to discuss textual narratives and how these manifest in the aftermath of a celebrity death, while Instagram will be used to study the visual narratives. As mentioned previously, mourning is an act of narrative construction, and this

section is going to consider these individual platform vernaculars and how they construct written and visual narratives. The platform vernacular of each of these sites is crucial to understanding what narrative does in these spaces. Mixed media sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook allow for narratives to be constructed and informed by both image and text. Fans use the more image-based sites in a way that constructs little narrative but is rich in semiotic and textual information. More text-based sites like Reddit have less restrictive limits on the number of words in individual comments, therefore narratives and stories can develop over longer posts with more complex language. As such, Reddit affords the user space to position their mourning through longer narratives. Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all model of narrative in these spaces. Instead, there is a Web of interwoven images, texts, and conversations dispersed across multiple social networking services.

### ***1.5.1 Reddit's Platform Vernacular***

Different social media sites structure material in different ways. The prominence of the 'feed' and 'timeline' systems pioneered by Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have disordered the ways in which we receive material online. The narrative worlds of social media 'cross between public and private contexts' (Page, 2012, p. 2), where we shift from direct messages to publicly facing posts in the same narratives. This switching between the public and private spheres couples with the uneven representation of media on the front-end platforms with emphasis on popular posts rather than the latest ones. This leads to a fragmented and uneven space for narrative to develop. Ruth Page states that these 'story-like fragments found in social media contexts are often ephemeral, [and] small' (*ibid*, p. 3) with users posting across media forms utilising images, text, and memes. These ephemeral narratives act as myths in these spaces, as they evoke certain emotions, culturally specific meanings, and display distinct and full stories with little obvious narrative development. But this changes depending on the affordances of the platform. A post on Instagram, for instance, can construct a complex narrative through a mixture of text and image but another one could simply be an image without narrative context.

Narrative on social media sites as a result is disordered. However, at the heart of this is still the need to create narrative continuity in these spaces. They act in the same way, finding shards of the story and forming these into a complete and coherent narratives, with 'even the quietest of conversational partners can be active co-authors' (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 24). This space in turn creates a 'multi-party, co-constructed narration' (Page, 2012, p. 3), which, although it is ephemeral in its context, still strives for a coherent narrative thread. To understand this, we must look at a specific social media site.

Reddit offers a space in which to study fan interactions in the post-death moment. Reddit has been underutilised as a site for research, with the little previous scholarship on it focusing primarily on the darker side of the platform, such as the Gamergate Internet scandal (Maloney et al., 2019). These discourses have shaped the perception of Reddit in wider culture, where it is seen as a wild west of the Internet, ungoverned and a breeding ground for problematic views (Marantz, 2018). The truth is murkier than this. The site boasts over 100 million more active monthly users than Twitter and is in the top ten most visited sites in the world. With this in mind, it is a complex representation of everything that exists on the Internet, from dedicated fan sites to activism, while also housing the darker elements present on all social media platforms (Clement, 2020). It is considered a relic from the forum-based social networks of the early Web 2.0 era, set up as a collection of thematic pages, or subreddits, which are prefixed by the letter r/, such as r/politics.

Reddit is a 'participatory culture platform' (Messanari, 2013, p. 1), meaning it offers a space in which users both create and engage with content. The platform vernacular of Reddit situates it as a site centred around the 'sharing of original and reposted content' (ibid, p. 2), where posts are made by members in boards or subreddits, known as threads. Users then earn 'karma' points, badges, and awards when their comments are upvoted; these awards 'signal to the community that a particular comment or post is substantive and adds to the larger conversation' (ibid, p. 3). Conversely, when a comment is downvoted the poster's account loses karma points. As such, the 'game' of Reddit is to try and collect as many points as possible, as value resides in the poster's ability to engage with different threads in interesting ways. The gamification of Reddit creates a space where valued comments are rewarded by the poster's peers (ibid). Posters receive instant validation on their interactions and can edit and adapt each post with corrections and updates when desired. If a post is

continually downvoted it can disappear from the thread, be hidden, or even deleted by the admin. This platform vernacular privileges posts and narratives which uphold the themes of the subreddit, with posts that radically differ from this hidden from view. A culture of mutual dependency permeates these spaces as a result, as users are rewarded for upholding the overriding narratives established in the thread, subreddit, or community.

When considering the narrative forms afforded by Reddit, we can see it is structured around what Ruth Page calls 'second stories.' These are:

stories or story episodes that follow a narrative that has been told either immediately before, or in close proximity to, the turns that have preceded it. Second Stories establish clear parallels with the first story, usually by matching the role taken by the tellers in the two cases (Page, 2012, p. 30).

Reddit is constructed as a way to enable these second stories to establish themselves under the original post. This is an act of narrative, with each new second story contributing and informing the whole of the narrative within the thread. This is focused on the 'co-constructive possibilities for narratives that are written by multiple tellers' (ibid, p. 117). The space of the social media site mirrors our primal cultural instinct to establish coherent and complete stories. The platform of Reddit allows for these multiple tellers to work towards the common goal of establishing a coherent narrative. There is an emphasis in these communities to 'create a single narrative text, rather than a dialogic co-tellership dispersed across different textual segments' (ibid). Social media narratives act in the same way as other narratives throughout our society, as they aim to construct a single narrative out of the debris left behind. Reddit operates through the concept of second stories, which build on the dominant narrative of the thread, with each user contributing to a single narrative text.

Reddit's construction offers a unique space to observe the interactions between fans in the immediate aftermath of a musician's death. The longer form comments, the allure of anonymity, and the archiving of posts after a short period of time, allow us to see how the news of a musician's death is conceived. Social networking services offer unique challenges to our ideas of narrative, especially in the fragmented nature of the platform's constructions. Story-making is embedded into the fabric of social media sites, as users

weave narratives around their own, and others, lives. The longer form posts of Reddit show us how fuller narratives can be made on social networking services which privilege more developed interactions and specific themed spaces. Social media has also provided the space in which narratives of the deaths of musicians can be constructed, used, and reinforced by fans.

### ***1.5.2 Instagram's Platform Vernacular***

Instagram in its simplistic form is a visual platform, created to share images. Users 'follow' accounts and can 'like', comment upon, or share photos with other users whilst also displaying their own photos. Instagram is a product of the camera phone. It is an app that allows users to remediate the presentation of the self, the world around us, and to document the everyday. Since its inception, users on the platform have created, maintained, and subverted the affordances of the vernacular of the site. From being a simple showcase of images, it is now a place with a learnt and performative set of behaviours, styles, and visual languages. These have permeated our everyday lives with phrases such as 'selfie', 'for the 'gram,' and 'DM' (direct message), becoming a common part of our culture and society's discourse. As such, the application is now an embedded 'everyday form of media practice' (Gibson et. Al. 2015, p. 258) whereupon photographs, memes, and filters have become 'materialised practices associated with everyday embodied life' (Gibson et. Al. 2015, p. 258). This has resulted in the changing ways in which we experience the world around us and especially, for the purposes of this thesis, how we represent materials around us.

Instagram's platform vernacular has become synonymous with the everydayness of the technology itself and the behaviours adopted by the active communities in this space. The affordance of being able to post a photograph at will has ingrained Instagram into our daily lives. The platform is based on the idea of continual flow, where the user is presented with image after image as they scroll through their home page. There is a restriction of space for peer-to-peer interaction as there is no dedicated wall space such as with Facebook, and no way to have a continual and centred conversation such as with Twitter or Reddit. Instead,

there is a focus on your own curated time, or grid, and the presentation of the self-outwards. Followers can 'like' photos, interact through comments, or engage in direct messages, but these are increasingly being hidden from the continual flow of the home page as more of the image is given privilege over the text of the captions and comments. This is underpinned by the use of hashtags which users use to insert themselves into wider 'hashtag conversation[s]' (Gibson et. al. 2015, p. 258). However, it needs to be pointed out that this is a continuation of the display outwards, rather than a two-way and engaged conversation. These hashtag conversations allow users to embrace the moment of posting and allow users to showcase new visual vernaculars and styles.

Unlike Facebook, Reddit, or Twitter, Instagram does not function fully in a computer's browser, rather it exists primarily as a smartphone app, ready to capture anything at any time. This is integral to how its vernacular has developed as the extraordinary events such as life and death sit alongside the 'mundane and intensely social practices' such as people's dinners or the latest meme (Edensor et-al, 2009, p, 10). The intersection of the extraordinary and the ordinary manifests itself through the materiality of these everyday posts and the presentation of the user outwards. The platform utilises a one directional presentation of the self, built for the remediation of space, time, and materiality. This restricts the ability to construct an ongoing dialog between users, meaning the platform acts as a means of presenting outwards, showcasing one user at a time, however, this also acts as a way to highly curate the user's own experiences, as each user has a unique content flow depending on who they follow. This presentation mixed with individual curation results in what Daniel Palmer calls the 'emotional archives' (2010, p. 6) of Instagram where the user creates and maintains their own life narratives in the presence of others. There is a digital materiality to these archives as they showcase the remediated lives of the people who construct them.

With all of this in mind, it is apparent that Instagram provides a place where mourning can be enacted following the death of a loved one or a celebrity. In their discussion of selfies at funerals, Gibbs et al, highlight how Instagram acts as a form of 'presencing' (2015, p. 266) for people following a loss as they mark the event, location, and experience of their mourning. This allows users to communicate their 'emotional circumstances and affective context' (ibid, p. 266), which can later be revisited on anniversaries or significant dates.

Mourning on Instagram fits into the practice of establishing an emotional archive, whereupon the extraordinary is recorded alongside the everyday. This has resulted in what they consider to be a focus on 'the event and its rituals' (ibid, p. 260) where the 'people present no longer the focal point of the image' (ibid, p. 260). This is intriguing as it points to what would seem logical in the space of the funeral: that it would be odd, or in bad taste, to take photos in a space where people are mourning.

However, through their analysis of the #funeral tag on Instagram, Gibson et al. acknowledge that the focal point is on the user themselves, recording their presence in the space of mourning, rather than anyone else present (2015). As such, we can see that the affordances of Instagram have allowed users to bring the camera along with them anywhere and in the process document the most intense emotional periods of their lives. The camera is faced forwards, towards the user, and the ritual is of posting the self in these spaces. This is an important distinction to make as the vernacular of Instagram highlights the constructed and shared artifice of the presentation of the self in these spaces. When we use the term 'platform vernacular', it encompasses the learnt visual and social behaviours embedded into these sites via user's habits and use of the tools. The 'particular affordances of the Instagram platform make this form of presencing increasingly networked and visible' (Gibson et. al., 2015, p. 264). The presentation of the self becomes the means through which users interact and acknowledge each other on this site. The shared language of the selfie, the meme, or the presentation of mourning following the death of a celebrity, is just another learnt language on this site, with users engaging and displaying in its shared artifice and shared construction.

Instagram is primarily a site dedicated to the presentation of the self. The site exists as a complex mix of forms, affordances, and vernaculars, which intersect in the everyday flow of content on individuals' pages. Instagram has been engrained into our everyday, documenting our life's moments, from the most mundane to the most hurtful or happy. At its heart, Instagram is a tool for presencing with the remediation facilities of the platform underpinning a co-presencing by disparate communities, fans, and friends. In the mourning process, this presencing makes something tangible out of something intangible and allows users to document their feelings, selves, and emotions in an archive that can be revisited at will. However, the platform vernacular of Instagram focuses the users on the freshest

content first. Therefore, this presencing is consequently heightened by only being able to be engaged with in the moment but then subsequently only available on the specific page of the user after being pushed off people's feeds by newer content. This leads to a personal archive of feelings, which unlike Reddit in the previous chapter, is a display of the self in a purer form with the interaction by other users being brief, in the moment, and limited, with all focus on the display of the poster. These social media sites have developed, reinforced, and informed the concept of parasocial relationships, running throughout all of our lives.

## **1.6 Parasocial Relationships and Online Spaces of Mourning**

The concept of the parasocial relationship was developed in 1956 by the theorists Donald Horton and Richard Wohl who described it as a relationship that was 'one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development' (Horton & Wohl, 1956, p. 215). They concentrated this on the experience that viewers had with the stars of television, characterising 'parasocial interaction [as] an (illusionary) experience of the viewer, who would feel like being in an interaction with a television performer, despite the nonreciprocal exposure situation' (Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011, p. 1104). Horton later embellished this definition by arguing that 'parasocial interaction [is experienced by the user] as immediate, personal, and reciprocal, but these qualities are illusory and are presumably not shared by the speaker' (Horton & Strauss, 1957, p. 580). As such, the relationship is one of intense emotional and personal feeling, but is a one-sided experience, with the fan consuming the art and then developing their relationships through this. These parasocial relationships mimic that of a 'face-to-face relationship without the two parties knowing each other on a personal level' (DeGroot & Leith, 2018, p. 201), fans use media objects through which they consume and feel intimately acquainted with the media figure (Rubin & McHugh, 1987).

David Giles places parasocial relationships within three different 'orders' (Giles, 2002, p. 297). A first order parasocial relationship is one where the user is being directly engaged by the media personality, 'for example a talk-show host facing the camera and greeting the viewer' (*ibid*). This is the type of parasocial relationship that has developed with the

platform vernaculars of the Internet, with this covering everything from Twitter interactions, YouTube vlogs, and engagement with Instagram profiles. Second order parasocial relationships place the fictionality of the media figure at the centre, with the user able to communicate with the actor who may play a role the fan has a relationship with, but with the fictional character being out of reach to the fan (ibid). The third and final order of parasocial relationships concerns that of entirely fictional characters such as cartoons and other media objects that have no presence in the 'real world' (ibid). As such, these are completely removed from the chance of interaction, with the fan entirely consuming these from their media objects.

It is worth noting at this point that parasocial relationships online somewhat cover all three of these orders. However, as mentioned above, the majority of our interactions on these sites sit in the first order, with the fan able to feel as if communication with the media figure is on a personal basis. The Internet has provided unprecedented access to the celebrities we have formed parasocial relationships with. The type of exposure has led us to get to know celebrities intimately through the Internet as we engage with the personalities and media objects they produce. This has created an 'ongoing media dialogue' (Gil-Egui, 2017, p. 263) whereupon the fan finds themselves further attached to the character or personalities' 'life, emotions, and behaviours' (ibid). Ultimately, we are coming into contact with more media from the celebrities we consume, from constructed versions of their everyday lives through something like Instagram stories, to more established media such as a feature within a magazine or a YouTube video. Ultimately, this has changed what the nature of being a celebrity is and the types of content we, as consumers, are subjected to. With this change our parasocial relationships have changed.

Social media has provided the space in which these parasocial relationships can play out. As relationships are formed with not just the celebrity but with other fans. As the above section on platform vernacular has shown us, the Internet has created a space in which users can engage with disparate threads and find community within these. These communities provide 'forums and collective spaces for discussion about important events surrounding famous subjects' (Gil-Egui, 2017, p. 263). They use these spaces to share the obsession of these relationships and find solace in the community that this provides. These 'dialogues with fan communities and celebrities' (Soukup, 2006, p. 326) offer users a chance

to enact their parasocial relationships in a comforting and supporting way, acting as an opportunity to get closer to the celebrity's life (Radford & Bloch, 2012, p. 264). This allows them to transcend previous iterations of these relationships and create and maintain a type of engagement that is synonymous with Web 2.0 and social media.

## **1.7 Methodology**

The methodology of this thesis is focused on a qualitative and holistic approach to the gathering and analysis of social media materials. By 'social media materials' I am referring to the Instagram posts, images, videos, Reddit threads, and Reddit boards (subreddits) I studied. I developed two rules while harvesting these posts: first, that they had to be made in the immediate twenty-four hours after the death of the musician was announced, and second, that they must be from either Reddit or Instagram. This provided unique challenges and there were some caveats within the materials I was eventually left with. Firstly, since I was not collecting the data at the time of the posting, I was reliant on the archival nature of these platforms and my ability to search back through these sites. This approach had some drawbacks, as some of the material had potentially been open for editing since its posting, however, I was able to work through this by time limiting my searches on Instagram and utilising the archival function built into Reddit.

Secondly, I dealt with the ethical aspect of collecting these posts through the complete anonymising of these materials. Reddit by its very nature is an anonymous platform as users post under pseudonyms, therefore I was able to view these posts without dealing with personal data, however I still removed the usernames in the following thesis. Instagram, however, offered a different challenge as I was confronted with images of mourners in which they were recognisably visible. I combated this by only focusing on profiles that were visible to the outside observer by the poster, which engaged with the hashtags #RIPBowie, #RIPGeorgeMichael and #RIPLeonardCohen, and I also made all profiles and faces anonymous. I understand the complexity of the permissions for using materials and the sensitive nature of these posts; as such, my first thought whilst looking at these posts was always about the mourner and how to be conscious of them as a fully rounded human being with dignity. To further protect the people in these images, I am never going to make them public, with an edited version of

this thesis appearing in the university archive.

The number of posts from each social media site differed for each artist and each site. I considered two Reddit subreddits for Chapter 2 on David Bowie, these being: r/music and r/indieheads. These posts had 5,900 posts and 400 posts respectively on each thread, which were distilled to the top 400 of the first thread and all of the second for in-depth study. For the benefit of the comparisons drawn in the chapter, I also looked at the r/music thread announcing the death of Leonard Cohen. Here, I considered another 400 of the top (most upvoted) comments on a thread of 3,500 posts. By picking the most upvoted comments to consider, I was allowing the public engagement with each thread to dictate what comments came to represent the communities' thinking. The above approach was mirrored in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, where concentration was focused on posts on Instagram. I looked at the first 400 posts that used the hashtags #rileonardcohen, #ripbowie, and #ripgeorgemicheal. This approach naturally had some pitfalls and as such should not be considered to be a conclusive idea of what was said on these platforms. Rather, as highlighted previously in this chapter, the platform vernacular of Instagram forced me to take this approach to combat the constant flow style of the platform.

As I outlined in-depth earlier in this chapter, time, the Internet, and mourning are intrinsically linked concepts that underpin our engagement with the death of a celebrity. Therefore, it was integral to the methodology of this thesis that these concepts were placed at the forefront of our thinking. One of the ways I did this was by concentrating on the immediate twenty-four hours after the death of the artist. As discussed at length earlier in this thesis, the platform vernacular of social media sites has not created new temporal forms but rather plays with the ones already available. Ultimately, the expansion of these platforms has 'created and might create norms of rapidly informing others about someone's death or reacting towards it within a short period of time' (Wagner, 2018, p. 4). The accessibility and ubiquitous nature of social media have created a form of engagement that allows for quick and instant access to the news of a death and also what other people are feeling. As such, considering the immediate twenty-four hours after the announcement of the artist's death highlights the instant nature of these sites and works with the platform vernaculars we are given.

Alongside the structure of the platform vernacular, we also need to consider how the intensity of feeling towards death is affected by our proximity to the news breaking. By looking at the immediate

period after the death of the celebrity, it stands to reason that the intensity of feeling, and indeed affect, is at its most potent. The twenty-four hours I am proposing to use is arbitrary in a sense, however, establishing a set period where both intensity of feeling can be seen and also the platforms can be accessed by mourners, allows for robust and repeatable data gathering for all three of the artists considered. This is mirrored in the platform vernacular of these sites, as outlined above with Reddit, where threads can be stopped and archived quickly. Further to this, we can see the exploration of Sara Ahmed's ideas of affect, and can ultimately see how these explosions of mourning are the culmination of a lifetime of love and admiration for the artist, as these 'emotions accumulate over time, as a form of affective value' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11).

It is at this juncture that we must define the term affect and how it will be integrated into the wider work of this PhD and its methodology. Sara Ahmed in her piece *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), outlines how the concept of affect can be considered through the emotional histories of our culture, and how we can view these emotions as a 'matter of how we come into contact with objects and others' (ibid, p. 209). As such, affect can be seen to describe how the relationship between objects, broadly defined, and emotions are integrated into our daily lives. Affect allows us to see emotions as something that goes beyond the individual and instead reflects a collective idea of how people interact with one another. Her definition of affective economies mirrors that of what we discussed previously as both the parasocial relationships in the digital world, and our concepts of 21st century mourning.

Ahmed States:

In such affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities — or bodily space with social space — through the very intensity of their attachments.  
(Ahmed, 2004, p. 117)

As such, this thesis will consider affect as not a unique and stand-alone concept, but rather, it will feed into the showcasing of the mourning forces and para-social relationships that inhabit these mourning posts. Thus, we can draw upon the ways affect theory and the affect economy have integrated into our modern concepts of emotion, meaning the same thing as mourning and mourning practices without using the term throughout the thesis.

The concept of 'netnography' (Kozinets, 2020) has permitted me to operate within the field of social

media effectively as a researcher. This concept allows for the ‘observation of practices and discourses taking place online as the researcher spends time in the social media sites observing the communities and interactions’ (Harju, 2015, p. 133). I did this by operating a holistic approach to these materials. This was achieved by printing these posts out and working with them in a physical manner. I then created a ‘methodology book’ in which I wrote notes, first impressions, and perceived links between the material I was studying. By taking myself offline, I was able to view these posts as objects of interest outside of the space of the social media site. This opened my research up to thinking about these posts as digital artefacts that exist in multiple times, places, and digital sites (a scan of this book appears in full within the appendixes). However, I did not lose sight of this project as a netnography.

I was conscious that I should not, nor would want to, digitally comment or interact with material I collected as a social media presence in the online space itself, and so I placed myself in the role of the observer of these behaviours. This has been characterised in digital ethnographic literature as ‘lurking’ (Garcia et al., 2009), where the researcher observes the online practices to inform their research, allowing them to collect data without engaging. This allowed me to focus on the material from the time period I was considering without effecting the validity and authenticity of the posts. For the transparency of my results, I believe time-limiting the material to within twenty-four hours of the musician’s death announcement allowed me to record and observe immediate and spontaneous online behaviours. The Internet is not one entity; as such I approached this project with the idea of the ‘multi-sited ethnography’ (Marcus, 1995, p. 95) in my mind. Through this we are able to consider ‘multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the local and the global’ (*ibid*). Ultimately throughout the proceeding work I embraced this idea as I tried to keep to the mantra of ‘Follow the people, follow the artefact’ (Boellstorff et. al., 2012, p. 60). In the next section of this introduction, I am going to consider mourning on social media as a construct of time, narrative, and memory, and how the platform vernaculars and affordances of Reddit and Instagram inform my site of research, underpinning all of the case studies that follow.

## 1.8 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis is to consider and evaluate how mourners employ social media in the immediate aftermath of a musician’s death. This will be done by utilising critical theory,

textual analysis, and digital ethnography to analyse material gathered in the twenty-four hours following the public announcement of the musician's death. This introduction has proposed how this will be done and highlighted the main fields of thought that this project will draw upon going forward. By focusing on three distinct musicians: David Bowie, George Michael, and Leonard Cohen, we will be able to draw comparisons in the similarities and differences in how they are mourned. This thesis will use these three musicians to focus on answering the main research question: What can social media coverage of the deaths of musicians tell us about collective mourning and the mourner in the 21st century? The concept of parasocial relationships tell us how users operate on these social media sites and the relationships which are forged between the fan and the star. It is with this in mind that we have to view these deaths, as mourners turn to social media to not just mourn an artist whose music they liked, but to mourn a real and tangible relationship in their lives.

Time, mourning, narrative, and memory are intrinsically linked in these displays. As discussed previously, these concepts have been manipulated and transformed by our society's turn towards both technology and social media. The rest of this thesis will be based on these concepts with each chapter detailing different ways these concepts interact, from the narratives constructed on Reddit to the objects displayed at mourning shrines. It is clear that technology has changed the ways in which we consider presence, time, memory, and ultimately our relationships with the figures in our past and present, as such, mourning is fundamentally engrained in our everyday lives through these concepts. Each following chapter will deal with an aspect of the mourning and how the persona of the mourner is engrained into the mourning process. These chapters are: 'Theories of Mourning'; 'Mourning and Narrative'; 'Objects and Sights of Mourning'; 'Words as Objects of

'Mourning'; and, finally, 'the Self(ie) in Mourning'. It is by considering the narratives, objects, and visuals of mourning, that we can uncover how we have changed as a society and where the self sits within these processes.

Chapter One, Theories of Mourning, discusses how mourning has been theorised by philosophers in the 20th century and how technology has shaped these ideas. There is particular focus on the position of the mourner within the mourning event. This is established by considering four thinkers and their theories of how the mourning event is experienced. These are: Sigmund Freud and the Replacement of the Loss; Kübler-Ross and the Five Stages of Loss; Barthes and the Prolonging of Loss; and Derrida and the Remembrance of the Lost. Each theorist offers a different perspective on the relationship between the mourner and the deceased, and how the mourner reacts after this loss. At the centre of each of these is the continued posthumous relationship with the deceased typified by Derrida's idea of the 'continued bonds,' and the ways we carry the dead with us through our lives. This chapter then goes on to consider how social media has facilitated different means of engagement with the lost. Social media is determined to not have fully changed our relationship with the deceased, instead it has given rise to a new form of socialised mourning as temporal and geographical obstacles are flattened. Ultimately, this is found to have led to a casualisation of mourning and a new understanding of our perceived ideas of personhood, time, and mourning.

Chapter Two, The Blackstar, takes as its basis the case study of David Bowie's death and the subsequent mourning on the social networking site of Reddit. Using this as the foundation, this chapter considers how narratives of loss and mourning are constructed in the posthumous moment. This is done by considering how narrative, myth, late style, and persona interact on the social media site of Reddit. The platform vernacular of Reddit allows users to create complex narratives that use the persona of David Bowie within their expressions of mourning. This is reinforced through the mediated narratives of Bowie's passing, culminating with the Blackstar persona that was established in the immediate period after his death. Within these interactions, Reddit becomes an archive of feelings into which mourners present their ideal persona of both Bowie and themselves. This chapter argues that mourning is an exercise in persona construction, as the mourners use the late style narrative of Bowie's passing (through the concept of the Blackstar persona) in the

display of their mourning. Ultimately, this allows users to display a part of themselves that they feel has been lost with the death of Bowie.

Chapter Three, *You Have Been Loved*, takes the death of George Michael as the basis for its analysis on the sites and sights of mourning remediated on the social networking site Instagram. It argues that the objects left at the shrines of celebrities give us insight to the ways in which their posthumous personas are constructed. This is considered through the mediated and remediated photographs of these shrines, placing the performance of mourner at the centre. The mourner is creating a display within the site of mourning, as they remediate their presence and highlight the objects they have instilled with the persona of George Michael. This is not created in a vacuum however, and by considering the ways in which George Michael was perceived prior to, and indeed following his death, we are able to see what the mourner is curating and creating in the objects and images they share. This is done by considering how the elements of persona, biography, taste, kitsch, and evocative objects intersect within both the site of the shrine and the remediation of these sites on Instagram. This chapter finds that these objects are reflective of an externalisation of the internal process of mourning. The mourner uses the shrine to construct both their own and George Michael's persona through the placing of objects and the presence of themselves. As such, what is, and indeed what is not left at these sites of mourning tell us how these artists are considered posthumously by their fans.

Chapter Four, *The Teacher*, considers how Leonard Cohen was mourned on the social networking service Instagram, with particular focus on the words shared within images. This chapter argues that the ways in which words were remediated and added to the visual text of Instagram established the mourning of Cohen within the pictorial language of the meme. Photographs of Cohen are discussed alongside artistic expressions of Cohen's words created by the mourners who post them. By considering these posts within the context of Instagram and the self-help aesthetics which have become a fixture of the platform, this chapter highlights how there is a co-authorship of the mourner and Cohen within both these remediated words and the visuals. The images posted in the aftermath of Cohen's death are evocative objects which mourners task with presenting both their mourning emotions and their cultural capital to fellow users. Ultimately, this chapter finds that the images of Cohen, the words that represent him, and the cultural milieu that surrounds these posts, are all

used in these spaces as surrogates not just for Cohen's memory but for the memory and emotions of the poster.

Finally, Chapter Five, The Self, links the previous chapters together by considering the position of the mourner in these processes through the concept of the selfie. The persona of the mourner is discussed in regards to the ways we present ourselves online, through the display and construction of the self via text, image, and engagement with others. By considering posts concerning all three of the artists discussed previously and on both the social networking services of Instagram and Reddit, this chapter combines the previous ideas under the banner of the self. It argues that all of the posts we see online are acts of persona construction in which users consciously present an idealised version of themselves. I term all of these posts 'selfies,' and it is through these selfies that the mourner can engage with the emotions they feel with loss. By considering the written, visual, and combination posts, this chapter finds that these mourning posts are displays of persona as much for the benefit of the mourner as for the artist. Ultimately, all of the posts are expressions of the emotional disturbances that arise within mourning and offer solace through the participation and engagement with others in these spaces. The next chapter of this thesis details different theories of mourning.

## **Chapter 1. Theories of Mourning: From Freud to Facebook**

### **2.1. Introduction: From Freud to Facebook**

No other process seems so right following the death of a loved one than mourning. It consumes us, dictates our actions, and helps deal with the loss felt in absence. The act feels organic, yet is socially constructed, filtered through western culture and tinged by age and experience. In the first section of this chapter, 2.2., I will trace a line through the concept of mourning using the works of Sigmund Freud (section 2.2.1), Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (section 2.2.2), Roland Barthes (section 2.2.3), and Jacques Derrida (section 2.2.4), deconstructing the use of the term and its application in modern thought. Each of these thinkers approaches the concept in a different way; Freud establishes an unworkable model of loss replacement; Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief have been distilled into the public consciousness; Barthes dedicates his later life to mourning his mother through image; Derrida sits at the intersection of them all. I have focused on the post-enlightenment, post-structuralist, western, and secular concept of mourning to centre my argument within this tradition. By doing this, I will be able to situate mourning within relevant literature and demonstrate the ways in which mourning is defined and manifested. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will be able to utilise the concept of mourning in a workable model, informing my research questions, and establishing a theoretical base to mourning in the digital age.

The second part of this chapter, 2.3., details the ways the concept of mourning manifests in the digital age. It starts where section 1.6. left off, detailing how mourning can be understood in our current Web 2.0 technology infrastructure, whilst also conceptualising how the idea of mourning has shifted from that outlined in section 2.2. of this Chapter (1). This will be done by discussing mourning on the Internet in broad terms in section 2.3.1. and then focusing this onto the subject of this thesis in section 2.3.3., which details how musicians have been mourned historically on the Internet. Finally, the concept of the

parasocial relationship will be set forth in section 2.3.4., allowing us to theorise the existing relationship between the musician and the fan and how this is transformed by death. The purpose of this chapter is to act as a literature overview that will equip us with the theoretical and analytical tools for the analysis chapters later in this thesis.

## **2.2. Towards an Understanding of Mourning**

Grief or mourning? At this stage I must distinguish between these two words. In the scholarship I outline below, these two words are used interchangeably. They both represent an emotive response experienced in the aftermath of a loss. Drawing on Freud's 'mourning and melancholia' (1917), mourning is the 'reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of an abstraction' (Freud, 1917, p. 242). Both words fit this definition, placing death as the defining aspect of the experience, whether metaphorically or physically. In their usage in academic literature and the popular vernacular, they have become interwoven, both inhabiting Freud's definition. For the purposes of this thesis, I will combine the two terms under the word 'mourning'. By doing this, I will use Freud, Barthes, and Derrida, to critically reflect on the experience and rituals of death and loss. However, there is a tension between the two terms when I consider Kübler-Ross's grief model. Here 'grief' will be used, as she uses it to mean the same process as mourning. Ultimately, I will have to use the two terms for the same process.

### ***2.2.1. Freud and the Replacement of the Loss***

In his work 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), Freud proposes that mourning is an organic process experienced after a bereavement. As outlined above, it is the 'reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction' (Freud, 1917, p. 242). It displays itself in the 'profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree' (ibid, p. 243). Mourning, for Freud, is a psychological condition which manifests in

varying symptoms, can be diagnosed, and is eventually 'overcome after a certain lapse of time' (ibid). It is a natural progression from the loss of the loved one, to a period of reflection and sadness. Finally, 'respect for reality gains the day' (ibid).

Mourning, in Freud's theory, is a series of tensions between the conscious and the subconscious brain. When it is the logical step to move on, the conscious brain is met with a refusal to let go of the lost object, while the subconscious is 'clinging to the object through the medium of hallucinatory wishful psychosis' (Freud, 1917, p. 243). When we are not ready to accept the loss, we enter a period of prolonged sadness which Freud considered wilful, wallowing in the processes of mourning. The concept of the 'wishful psychosis' permeates mourning and melancholia. Freud continually reinforces the idea that mourning is a medical condition which has an end, claiming that if you don't reach that end you descend into melancholia. The two concepts are deeply entwined; both display the same symptoms listed previously, however, melancholia 'finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings' (ibid). The mourner slips into a period where they turn the pain onto themselves. They are mourning the other but prolonging their relationships with them by turning the mourning onto their own ego. This is the difference between the two terms: 'in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself' (ibid, p. 245). Mourning is moved from a natural - or as Freud would say, healthy - process, into a prolonged and unhealthy one via melancholia.

To understand melancholia's application, it is worth looking at the example of Queen Victoria. When her husband Albert died in 1861, she never fully recovered. She engaged in a prolonged mourning period, wearing black, erecting monuments in his name, and refusing to fully mourn until she herself died forty years later (BBC, 2014). In Freud's theory of mourning Victoria is trapped in the first stages of the mourning process. She refuses to move on from the pain of death and therefore slips into the deeper stage of melancholia. For mourning to be natural and to not descend into melancholia, it has to have an end; 'We rely on it being overcome after a certain lapse of time, and we look upon any interference with it as useless or even harmful' (Freud, 1917, p. 243). Freud calls this process 'the work of mourning'. This is a process with an end, and only by working to this end, can we truly move on. When this work of mourning is completed, then the self, or ego, becomes 'free and

uninhibited again' (ibid, p. 244). Therefore, in Freud's methodology mourning is a linear process. It must be completed or else we have failed.

Why does Freud's analysis seem so cold? To answer this, we must first ask: what are people truly mourning in Freud's theories? In 'Mourning and Melancholia', Freud constructs an analogy in which a woman who is 'loudly pitying her husband' for 'being tied to such an incapable wife as herself, is really accusing her *husband* of being incapable' (Freud, 1917, p. 247). The anger and pain from the loss is not directed at the loss of the other but rather at the other for being taken from us. Mourning, and eventually melancholia, are expressions of this narcissistic energy; we grieve endlessly because we are too focused on ourselves to let the other go. However, Freud also states that:

Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfaction it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished (p. 254).

Both the endless repetitions of pain seen in melancholia, and the work of mourning, are expressions of our own narcissistic energies. For Freud, when we are mourning, the object of the loss is immaterial, and it is only by fully rejecting the other that we can fully move on. We are never truly mourning the other. Rather we are mourning a part of ourselves which is lost with their passing.

Freud's theory of mourning has become an invaluable resource since its creation. In the book *The Mourning of John Lennon* (1998), Anthony Elliott claims that Freud's theories are essential to understanding Lennon's relationship to the loss of his mother. Elliott builds on Freud's theory of the mourning process and attaches this to the creative process; 'creative work is integral to the process, often unconsciously, of mourning lost love' (Elliott, 1998, p. 6). He goes on, following Freud, to state that 'without [a] mourning [process] there can be no self-development, understanding, or change. Without mourning we are hampered in preparing for our own loss, as it were, in death' (ibid). Elliott echoes Freud's assertion that we are really mourning a part of ourselves. By engaging creatively with his mourning,

Lennon was able to develop himself through his art, and thus the mourning process became a way to engage critically with his own emotions. Through these creative efforts, he was actually mourning a part of himself which was lost with his mother.

Eng and Kazanjan's introduction to their book *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, continues Elliott's argument but supplants mourning with melancholia. They argue that: 'In describing melancholia as a confrontation with loss through the adamant refusal of closure, Freud also provides another method of interpreting loss as a creative process' (Eng & Kazanjan, 2003, p. 4). Elliott considered mourning to underpin the creative process whilst Eng and Kazanjan argue that it is melancholia, with its refusal to be completed, which sparks creativity. However, they go on to say that these terms are intertwined, and we cannot engage with one and not the other. They state that 'the work of mourning is not possible without melancholia' (ibid). This is manifested in the way 'mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest', while 'melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects' (ibid). By combining the two, we can see how both actions inform the mourning process.

Depathologising melancholia allows for its use as a bridge to our past. Therefore, the dichotomy of mourning and melancholia no longer exists, and instead the two co-exist in the mourning process. This allows us to consider how mourning in digital cultures can be multifaceted and informed by more than one action.

The challenging aspect of Freud's theory is embedded into the dichotomy of mourning and melancholia. We can either replace the loss we have felt (you must take a new spouse etc.), or we can never be at peace, allowing it to devour the self and completely internalising the other, leaving them a static image in our minds. Eng and Kazanjan's use of Freud allows us to see that the two processes can be combined and utilised in a creative engagement with the past. As Richard White points out, by following Freud's logic, we 'lose the sense of an ongoing relationship with the other person' (White, 2015, p. 181). Kathleen Woodward also claims Freud's work makes too many assumptions in the way he articulates the idea of mourning, the first being that we don't respond differently to 'the deaths of people we are intimately bound to' (Woodward, 1993, p. 84). Is the mourning process the same no matter whether we know someone closely or just in passing? The second assumption he makes is the idea that people 'can in some measure in due time be "replaced"' (ibid). Can we ever

truly fully mourn the death of our parents if they cannot be replaced? Freud's theory suffers from what Woodward states as just 'getting it over and done with' (ibid), ultimately uncovering the fact that his 'text does not seem sufficiently informed by an understanding of the experience of mourning, of the affective dimensions of grief' (ibid, p. 86). In Freud, mourning is left as a hollow process of cold forgetting, negating the overwhelming psychological pain these processes have on our emotional state. Although Eng and Kazanjan's assertion that combining the two concepts leads us to a more refined idea of mourning, it still rests on the assumption that a model of mourning can be constructed and attached to all forms of loss.

### ***2.2.2. Kübler-Ross and the Five Stages of Loss***

Building on Freud's model of mourning, Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief from her book *Death and Dying* (1969) is perhaps the most well-known mourning model in the public consciousness. Kübler-Ross's intention with her five stages model of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, was to understand the mental state of the dying individual and how doctors might position themselves to understand and help. Each phase represents a state of thinking on the journey through the process of dying. The stages do not have to come in order, but they must all be completed. Unlike the other theories outlined here, this is not a theory which places any emphasis on the mourning state of the survivors of death; rather it centres the terminally ill and the people who are tasked with taking care of them. Kübler-Ross states the book's purpose is to 'refocus on the patient as a human being, to include him in dialogues, to learn from him the strengths and weaknesses of our hospital management' (Kübler-Ross, 1969, preface). This original use has faded considerably in the modern interpretation of this model. It is now used as a means by which people can articulate their grief universally.

Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief continues Freud's theory of mourning as a process that must be worked through to be completed. The final stage, acceptance, is similar to Freud's final mourning phase, while the other four stages give articulation to the gaps between the initial loss and the end of the mourning period. Any comparisons between these models are

destined to break down, however. Kübler-Ross's stage model reflects the dying's version of events and naturally ends with acceptance of the impending loss, disappearing after the event of death. The positioning of both Kübler-Ross's and Freud's periods of mourning show how these models differ; one starts at the beginning of death while the other starts, and ends, with the dying. This leaves a question mark over its effectiveness as a way of articulating personal loss, especially when we compare it to dedicated models which focus on the survivors and not the dying.

Although Kübler-Ross's model is not designed as a model for mourning the dead, culturally, no other articulation of mourning has held such a strong place in our collective imagination. In music scholarship it has become an easily identifiable structure, allowing us to explore the concepts of mourning through a universal idea of how the mourning process is formulated. In line with Kübler-Ross's assertion that this model applies to the dead, Beverly Lewis Parker uses the five stages of grief to understand the structure of Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra (Parker, 1989). Lewis states that Bartók knew he was dying of leukaemia; he 'was concerned with facing death at the time he composed the concerto and his concern [with death] played a part in his shaping of the world' (ibid, p. 533). The five stages of grief give articulation to how an artist might be dealing with an incoming loss. Here lies the power of the Kübler-Ross model; it allows us to understand people who are coming to terms with their own death. First there may be denial and then eventually acceptance, something which is missing from survivor mourning as there is no definite end point.

Gilad Cohen uses Kübler-Ross to explore the survivor's mourning in his deconstruction of Pink Floyd's *Shine on you Crazy Diamond* (Cohen, 2018). The stage model, for Cohen, allows for the understanding of the music itself, relating the musical forms to the expression of the stages of grief. He argues that this is an 'effective musical structure that expresses a sequence of emotional reactions to loss' (ibid, p. 107). Cohen states that the musical structure mirrors that of the stage model, allowing him to give meaning to the musical forms and to position mourning as the main emotional element in the piece. The uses of Kübler-Ross's model in this scholarship demonstrates how this model has been separated and deconstructed away from its original use. It has become a shorthand for understanding the ways mourning can be structured, allowing people to articulate the inarticulable.

The adoption of the Kübler-Ross model isn't limited to traditional scholarship, it has pervaded popular culture as well. In doing so, it has become a one-size –fits-all model for expressing mourning in the popular vernacular. (Rothaupt & Becker, 2007, p. 7). This use has extended from the specific to meanings more akin to Freud's assertion that we can mourn the abstract. In 2016 *The Guardian* (Hermon & Israel, 2016) printed a list of songs utilising the five stages of grief to come to terms with Donald Trump's successful bid for the American presidency. Each stage had a song to symbolise the feeling of hopelessness and loss some felt at this election, culminating in R.E.M.'s 'It's the End of the World as We Know It' signifying the final acceptance phase. This gives a crucial insight into how the model has been adopted by western culture and how it manifests in everyday interactions. It is a tool which is easily extended to convey a sense of loss and to give articulation to the act of mourning.

Kübler-Ross's stage theory of grief does not fail due to something she has overlooked. Rather, it is the way it has been divorced from its original use and intention. It works as a model for understanding the ways in which the dying come to terms with their mortality and the stages that may lie along the way of this realisation. However, it has grown out of this definition and instead pervades the popular consciousness as a tool for understanding all forms of mourning. This, I argue, is where it is adequate for the purposes of this thesis. The stage model works for the dying as the acceptance ends with the death of the individual, but this cannot happen with survivor mourning. As Kübler-Ross's model ends, mourning, in the Freudian sense, begins. Christopher Hall argues therefore, that all model-based mourning processes are implicitly flawed as they are 'incapable of capturing the complexity, diversity, and idiosyncratic quality of the grieving experience' (Hall, 2011, p. 2). Just like Freud's theories of mourning, Kübler-Ross's fails in positioning the individual as an autonomous being and negating the personal realities of loss. There cannot be a one-size-fits-all model of mourning.

### **2.2.3. Barthes and the Prolonging of Loss**

Roland Barthes was never the same person after his mother died. In his last book, *Camera Lucida* (2000), Barthes traces a line through his mourning via the medium of photography. Barthes's work is a 'counter text to Freud' (Woodward, 1993, p. 84). Instead of replacing his loss with another, Barthes refuses the cathartic elements of mourning, choosing instead to never betray his mother's memory by moving on. For Barthes the pain cannot be replaced, his ego cannot be fully liberated, and his mourning can never be completed. Counteracting Freud's notions of natural or healthy mourning, in *Camera Lucida* Barthes surrounds himself in mourning, refusing to accept his loss and protracting his pain. In Freud's analysis, Barthes would be diagnosed with suffering from melancholia, prolonging his sadness, and allowing his grief to dictate his actions. Barthes does this through a picture of his mother as a child. He substitutes the object of his mother for the object of her photograph, refusing to move on from the pain he feels in her absence. He uses this as a means of prolonging his relationship to her. The image is the means in which he keeps her essence alive, as well as an exercise in creative and critical writing.

Photography, for Barthes, is the ultimate mourning medium. It is the way the subject (the self), transforms into the object (the photograph). This imbues photography with 'a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity' (Barthes, 2000, p. 12). The process leaves a snapshot of the self in the past, producing in this dissociation a 'micro-vision of death' (ibid, p. 14). The photograph is the 'living image of a dead thing' (ibid, p. 79), placing death as the 'eidos' (ibid, p. 79), or distinctive character, in all photographs. This glimpse of one moment lives on only within the object of the photograph itself, leaving the past subject in a perpetual state of death. As such, Barthes argues that photography ultimately represents more than the subject of the photograph, it represents their death.

Barthes's theorisation of photography as representative of death permeates his conception of the mourning process. This dislocation between the real and represented plagued Barthes in the aftermath of his mother's death. He claims that this is 'one of the most agonising features of mourning' (Barthes, 2000, p. 63); that while looking at his mother's image he may not be able to 'recall her features' (ibid, p. 63). For his mourning to be

articulated, Barthes needed to centre himself in his own pain. Via the image of his mother, he is trying endlessly to never forget her image. In this act lies the ultimate betrayal of surviving: forgetting. Instead of enacting the work of mourning through replacement, mourning must be revelled in. Honouring the dead becomes the overarching theme of this pain, and how do we honour the dead when we naturally want to move on from the pain they have caused? Barthes navigates this by simply not moving on, reinforcing that moving on 'would be an act of betrayal' (White, 2015, p. 181) to his mother's memory. Contrary to Freud, Barthes privileges this act of honouring, making sure the dead's image lives on, even if it is at the expense of his own sanity.

In Barthes's theory, we can see that death changes our perception of the image. He sees the future death of his mother inscribed into the photograph of her as a child. Photographs of the dead possess a dual quality; they are at once vestiges of a life once lived and a reinforcement of our own mortality. Susan Sontag reinforces this by stating that the 'link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people' (Sontag, 1977, p. 55). Sontag and Barthes both argue that the photograph acts as a symbolic death, that all photographs highlight a subject that is no longer living. However, this becomes more powerful and pertinent when the subject is in fact dead. The power of death permeates the photograph itself; when someone dies their image is changed forever. When we are given the knowledge of the subject's death, the object of the photograph changes. Take for example a photograph of George Michael; what do we see when we look upon it? We could remember his looks, maybe a song, maybe a certain decade, but after a while we are reminded that he is indeed dead. This is the truth of mourning for Barthes. When we go through this period, we are changed forever and there is no hope, for him at least, of a return.

Photographs allow us to engage with the past. Keightley and Pickering believe the process of remembering through objects is an active, and ultimately, creative one (2012). They claim we operate in a field of 'cross-temporal transaction[s]' (Keightley & Pickering, 2012, p. 43), where 'lived experience becomes assimilated experience' (*ibid*). This is the process whereupon 'the subject engages imaginatively with what is retained from the past and, moving across time, continuously rearranges the hotchpotch of experience into relatively coherent narrative structures' (*ibid*). As a result of this, 'imagination usurps memory' (*ibid*,

p. 44). We remember through imagined reconstructions of the past via snapshots in time. In the Israeli animated documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008) there is a conversation between an ex-soldier and his therapist about their involvement in the 1982 war in Lebanon. During the scene they discuss an experiment where people were shown ten photos of their past with one being a complete fabrication. When asked if they remembered the fake photo, people said they did, even talking in depth about the day in question. Their memories adapted to the photographs and their imagination constructed a past that did not exist. This highlights the integral nature of photography to the ways in which we engage with the past, especially the version of the past we remember and construct. Barthes's ideas inform this; through his mourning he is constructing an ideal past through the photograph of his mother.

Media objects, such as photographs and phonographs, have the power to transcend time. Pickering and Keightley state these media objects 'seduce us with an illusion of transcendence' (Keightley & Pickering, 2006, p. 161). Through this act the 'messages from the past are disembodied' (*ibid*); media objects allow for this transcendence of time. Barthes saw death inscribed in the image of his mother; he engaged in an active reimagining of the past through the object of the photograph. As such, the photograph transcends time in Barthes's mourning, allowing him to connect to the past at will. By building on this, Pickering and Keightley show that the object of the photograph invites this imaginative reconstruction of the past. This informs the mourning process by highlighting the power of the photograph as a bridge to the past. As memory fades, the photograph survives as a focal point for mourning. Ultimately, Barthes's theories of mourning privilege the photograph as the gateway between the present and the past. This is extended by Pickering and Keightley to include all media objects. These objects transcend time and alter our perception of permanence. When Barthes uses his mother's photograph to localise his mourning, he keeps her alive. Through these objects we imaginatively construct and connect with the past.

Barthes's, however, lies in his fanatical devotion to the pain of mourning and the one-sided dialogue he has with the dead. Barthes increasingly forces himself to feel that 'our bodies carry death in them' (Woodward, 1993, p. 93), a symbolic death. He makes us consider that, unlike with Freud's healthy mourning of detachment, we 'may not detach ourselves from our losses. Instead, we may live with them. And die with them. If grief is painful, it is also

absorbing' (ibid). Woodward's analysis of Barthes places into focus the attraction of his position. Mourning is a process which is all consuming, we cannot simply detach ourselves and move on. However, by privileging his own pain, Barthes falls into Freud's reinforcement that mourning can easily slip into narcissism, centring the mourning process on himself. I believe that Barthes's reflections on mourning, although understandably a facet of some people's experience, fail to acknowledge the cathartic release which coming to terms with our loss can create.

I believe that the way Barthes articulates this changing relationship with the image is the most important element we can take from his theory for an overall theory of mourning. When a death occurs, we are forever changed, and this is measurable in our relationship with the deceased's image. Through Pickering and Keightley, we can see that the media object informs our relationship to the past and the dead. These relationships, contrary to Barthes's opinions, are not static ones, but are rather complex negotiations of our own ethical ideals and relationships to the dead other. As such, these theories provide an invaluable resource when we consider how these mourning practices are established in the digital age. Through the affordances of reproduction which digital platforms offer, images can be shared without their fidelity suffering and ultimately become a focal point of mourning rituals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, is there a mourning model which keeps this relationship with the dead alive and neither completely disappears the other, nor elevates them to a point of no return?

#### **2.2.4. Derrida and the Remembrance of the Lost**

Mourning is a constant theme running through Derrida's work. It has been at the centre of his works on Marx (2006), Paul de Man (1989), and in his collection of eulogies for his departed literary friends: *The Work of Mourning* (2001). Counteracting the Freudian, the five stages, and Barthesian models of mourning, Derrida leaves the door open to an ongoing dialogue and relationship with the deceased. We could call this position a pathway in between the two extremes of mourning and melancholia. He is no longer privileging the other above himself (in Barthes); centring the dying at the heart of the argument (Kübler-

Ross); nor replacing the loss felt by their absence (such as Freud does). Instead, Derrida positions a 'call to responsibility' (Derrida, 2001, p. 44) model of mourning, a model which 'depathologises mourning and sees it as an opportunity for an engagement with the legacy of the dead' (Kirkby, 2006, p. 461). This opens the door to mourning being an individual process, where there is no right or wrong way to engage with the dead. Removing the medical connotations of Freud's mourning work, leaves Derrida's thoughts not on completing mourning, but to constitute mourning as an ongoing presence in our lives.

Derrida's issues with Freud begin with his dismissal of the other:

Everything is organised in order that he [the deceased] remain a missing person in both cases, having vanished, as other, from the operation, whether that is mourning or melancholy. Departed, nowhere to be found (Derrida, 1977, p. 103).

Derrida subsequently uses this rejection as the basis for his approach to mourning. Joan Kirkby traces this line of thought through the processes set forth in Abraham and Torok's *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994) and their concepts of *introjection* and *incorporation*. Introjection is the process in which, when the other dies, the ego soaks up their essence and the 'qualities esteemed in the other' (Kirkby, 2006, p. 466). While incorporation is the process in which the ego completely internalises the 'other', building a monument, or a crypt as Abraham and Torok call it, to them within the psyche. In this model, incorporation takes the place of melancholia, keeping the dead alive 'in a secret tomb inside the subject' (Abraham & Torok, 1994, p. 130). It is within this crypt, Abraham and Torok argue, where the other destabilises the subject: 'sometimes in the dead of night... the ghost of the crypt comes back to haunt' (p. 131). For Derrida, however, this model of mourning was unsatisfactory; why should we keep the dead in stasis? Instead he opted to 'open the doors of the crypt and instantiates an ongoing conversation with the dead' (Kirkby, 2006, p. 466). They point out that, 'in Derridean mourning we honour the otherness of the dead and our attachment to them' (p. 464). This is constituted in the binary Derrida puts forth of how the dead are situated in our lives, they are both 'within us' and 'beyond us'. Building on Abraham and Torok's incorporation hypothesis, Derrida opens the crypt and forces a dialogue between the living and the dead. By positioning the dead in this way, I will be able to consider how technology allows for the continuation of these bonds post-death.

Derrida believes that all human relationships are tinged with mourning from their outset. It is self-evident that within all relationships ‘one friend must always die first,’ (Derrida, 2001, p. 1) therefore one is always left to mourn the other. This is where the internalisation, or incorporation, for Derrida takes place. Mourning, Derrida argues, ‘comes before death’ (ibid, p. 146). Throughout our lives we are constantly internalising the other in our relationships in an ongoing dialogue with ourselves: ‘Everything we inscribe in the living present of our relation to others already carries, always, the signature of memoirs from beyond the grave’ (ibid, p. 28 – 29). Derrida believes this conversation continues post death, as the other is within us yet still beyond us; their restoration is ‘limited’ (ibid, p. 11) while they remain ‘in us but totally other’ (ibid, p. 11). We can see this in the ways in which people believe that no matter what they do the deceased is with them, living on through the mourner.

Building on Barthes’s idea of honouring, or what he considered the betrayal of forgetting the dead, Derrida positions this honouring in the self. Instead of focusing on the other’s otherness in death, the other’s crypt is left open and our relationship with them continues. This process changes our relationship to the outside world and ‘in [this] mourning we find ourselves at a loss, no longer ourselves’ (Derrida, 2001, p. 5). However, instead of this changing of the self being a detrimental element in our lives, like Freud, Kübler-Ross, and Barthes, Derrida instead believes this is the most natural element of mourning. He claims it is ‘only through memory and mourning that we become ourselves’ (ibid, p. 26). Mourning is the tension between negotiating a loss and making sure that this loss cannot be forgotten. Through the process of an open incorporation, as Derrida would define it, we must engage with the dead for ‘if we don’t speak, the dead do not live on... this is the tension of mourning’ (ibid, p. 28). With death we allow the other to continue living in ourselves and with this dialogue we are changed forever, it would be a betrayal to the dead not to do this. Peter Dayan continues the concept of respecting the dead through Derrida. He reinforces that mourning, via Derrida, involves a continuing ‘sense of duty’ (Dayan, 2006, p. 114) towards the dead. This is manifested in acknowledging the ‘guilt’ (ibid, p. 114) associated with surviving the initial death and continuing friendship bonds post death. We can see how from this how Derrida’s concept of respecting the dead via our continued relationship with them has gained traction in theoretical arguments.

For Derrida the mourning process is 'constitutive' (Kirkby, 2006, p. 464); it allows for a development of the self without negative connotations. As such, it constructs a place between mourning and melancholia. By stripping melancholia of its pathological label, Derrida can construct mourning by remembering the dead and by bettering the self. Kirkby argues that he does this by proposing that within us there are 'traces of the other' (ibid, p. 467), for in 'our own speech there is always the trace of speech that comes from the other' (ibid, p. 467). Speech in this context is the essence of the departed other. I believe this is the most powerful element of Derrida's argument, we all feel the presence of the other in our inner monologue and it is only natural that this continues post-death. This Derridean model, as Kirkby terms it, allows for an 'intellectually and emotionally nuanced model of mourning, a model wherein psychic functioning depends neither on a refusal to mourn or abandoning the dead' (ibid, p. 468). This model offers personal growth alongside mourning while also 'respecting the (dead) other as other' (ibid, p. 469).

In his positioning of mourning as a constitutive element in our lives, Derrida falls in line with current medical and psychological ideas of how mourning is treated. Previously, psychiatry had been obsessed with the Freudian model of mourning, known in the field as *grief work*, which, as Hall states, 'profoundly shaped professional intervention' (Hall, 2011, p. 1) since its publication. Hall goes on to claim that this has provoked a switch from the 'popular notions which construe grief as the navigation of a predictable emotional trajectory, leading from distress to recovery' (ibid, p. 1), to a model where there is a 'recognition of the potentially healthy role of maintaining continued bonds with the deceased' (ibid, p. 1). Derrida's link with the dead - his opening of the crypt - is now a cornerstone of current psychiatry relating to the science of mourning. Furthermore, Derrida's idea of personal growth and development alongside mourning has also been embraced through a: 'growing awareness that losses can also provide the possibility of life-enhancing post-traumatic growth as one integrates the lessons of loss and resilience' (ibid, p. 1). This concept has been categorised by Hall as the idea that 'death ends a life, not necessarily a relationship' (ibid, p. 3), and there exists the 'possibility of the deceased being both present and absent' (ibid, p. 3) throughout our lives. This is the most powerful element of Derrida's theorisation of mourning. We can see that as theorists such as Kirkby and Hall have elaborated on

Derrida's concept of a dialogue post-death, they have established this dialogue as a cornerstone of mourning.

Derrida's theories are more attractive than Freud's, Kübler-Ross's, and Barthes's because they offer a continued chance of a relationship with the dead. If we ignore for the minute the prospect of an afterlife, mourning is concerned with the loss felt after a death in the mortal realm, and when there is a prospect that this loss is not total, we as humans embrace it. In current psychiatry, this link with the dead is 'conscious, dynamic, and changing' (Hall, 2011, p. 3). I would argue that this model is especially pertinent to the current digital advances of our society and the ways in which we use technology. As we can still engage with the online presences of the other, we can still maintain the open dialogue of our relationship. Mourning is now filtered through a process of continued dialogue not just within us, as Derrida would argue, but external to us through technology. This is something which will be discussed in section two of this chapter.

### ***2.2.5. A Better Understanding of Mourning***

By tracing the idea of mourning through these four thinkers, it has been possible to understand how this term has been defined and manifested in western 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century secular thought. I have split these four thinkers into two different subsections: model-based (Freud and Kübler-Ross); and individualised mourning (Barthes and Derrida). The purpose of this was to signal the two different approaches to the mourning process, allowing each to inform the other. It would be naïve to construct a one-size-fits-all model of mourning which can be planted into a universal setting. If the writings of these four thinkers, and modern psychiatry, can teach us anything it is the fact that mourning is an impossibly hard to define and even harder to treat phenomenon. However, that does not mean that we cannot take elements away from each thinker to help construct a definition of mourning and how it is manifested, for the purpose of this thesis.

Each theorist offers something unique to a theory of mourning. It is worth looking at Freud's work as a foundation on which thinking surrounding mourning has been established in the

20<sup>th</sup> century western canon. Its emphasis on mourning as a process one must go through has underpinned theoretical work on mourning since its inception. It is clearly detrimental to think of mourning as a process with an end, making the mourner feel inadequate if this is not fulfilled. Nevertheless, Freud's concept of narcissism underpinning the mourning process is useful to consider alongside the other theories mapped out here. It underlines what is really being mourned in these processes: the loss of something within the mourner. By combining mourning and melancholia, Eng and Kazanjan's hypothesis allows for a connection with the past in a depathologised way. We can engage with the loss of the past without becoming lost in melancholia. I believe this deconstructs Freud's argument to allow it to branch out from his initial mourning process model. As such, it can be used as an important element in my research as a way of understanding how mourning has been discussed throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century thought.

Kübler-Ross' stage model has manifested itself as the primary model of mourning in the public consciousness. However, it has developed drastically away from its original inception and tries to be something it is not fit to be. This, along with Freud, constructs an easily used model of mourning which can be transferred to any type of loss. Its proliferation within popular culture is testament to this. However, the structure itself does not work when we consider the continual engagement with loss throughout a life. By focusing on a model which has a definite end, ie: the actual death of the dying person, Kübler-Ross's five stages only works in this capacity. It suffers the same fate as Freud's mourning model in the sense that by trying to construct a one size fits all model, Kübler-Ross neglects the individualisation of death and the mourning period. I believe however, that although these models should not be used in understanding the mourning process, the language Kübler-Ross uses could be useful for further developments in this field and for other studies.

Offering the counternarrative to this idea, Barthes's idea of mourning is too heavy on narcissism and underpinned by an attachment to his own pain as a means of memorial to his mother. However, his notion of the changes which occur with a death is integral to our understanding of the use of images in the mourning process. We are changed following the death of the other, while the images we look upon of the other are also changed. Pickering and Keightley developed this further by claiming that we actively engage with a reconstruction of the past via media objects. This develops Barthes's mourning process

further into the ways in which we use objects of the past to inform our present. I argue that this is particularly clear in the ways in which we collectively mourn, something I will consider in the next section of this chapter.

Derrida gives articulation to the development of Freud and Barthes as built on by Eng and Kazanjan and Pickering and Keightley, providing the most workable definition of mourning out of them all. These theorists inform one another far more than it seems on the surface. Each are consciously trying to reconstruct a bridge to the past and the lost other. By constructing a link between the living and the dead, we can keep their uniqueness alive while still respecting the pain we are feeling with our loss. Mourning is the process in which we feel the loss of something/someone that is missing, we cannot simply replace the thing that is lost (Freud) nor allow it to devour us (Barthes). Instead the complex nature of mourning means we need to engage with a process which straddles these two approaches. By creating the connection with the lost, we do not allow ourselves to feel the tension that is created with the separation from them. In its place we can explore a new type of relationship with the dead which is unique to both us and them.

However, these processes are completely devoid of any relation to 21<sup>st</sup> century technology and its effect on memory, culture, and interaction. In the next section I will consider how our conception of mourning is shaped firstly by collective engagement and memory and then by our ongoing engagement with technology and how this relates to the 21<sup>st</sup> century idea of the self.

### **2.3. Digital Mourning Theories**

Mourning is a process of time. For Freud it was about trying to move forward in time and separate yourself from the event of death by moving on. For Barthes, mourning was based in the past, a place for memory and one which could be returned to at will through objects. In contrast, Derrida allows time to be a concept which can be manipulated and transformed, bending it at will to allow the dead to live on. However, these theorists were writing in a different age of social interaction. Since these works on mourning, time has been

continually fractured and reconstructed by mediated technologies. In the following pages I will discuss how mourning is manifested within our digital world.

### ***2.3.1. Mourning and the Internet***

As long as humans have had the Internet, we have mourned on it. Whether that was through dedicated message boards, gravestone sites, or more casual fandom sites and forums (Gibson, 2007, 2015; Walter, 2015). Steven Jones in his deconstruction of mourning on the Internet in 2004, stated that mourning has not been changed by technology, rather that there is 'nothing new or unique about the Internet and computer-mediated communication that print media cannot provide' (Jones, 2004, p. 84). This assertion needs to be considered in the historical period in which it was made. In the grand scheme of the Internet, Jones was writing in a completely different age, with different platforms and affordances than the technological world we are currently in. The rise of social media has changed the ways in which we communicate and the ways in which we have mourned. Mourning plays out in both the time of the mourner and the time of the world, all filtered through the platforms we use. To understand how social media has shaped our perceptions of time and engagement, this next section will consider how time has been shaped on the Internet amid the rise of Web 2.0 technologies.

### ***2.3.2. Digital Mourning Theories***

As mentioned at the beginning of this sub-section, Jones in his deconstruction of mourning on the Internet placed emphasis on the continuity between mediums. His statement that there is 'nothing unique about the Internet and computer-mediated communication that print media cannot provide' (Jones, 2004, p. 84), seems now to be impossible. When considering Web 2.0 technologies and how these reorganise and disturb our concept of time, Jones' arguments are not convincing. Jones' idea of print media acting in the same way discounts people's ability to change their social worlds and engage with ever evolving

content on social media platforms. However, we cannot discount his ideas outright, instead it becomes increasingly clear that the Internet has changed our perception of time but also exists as an extension of our daily lives. As such, something as fundamental to the human condition as mourning is not distinct on the Internet but has evolved into something similar though different, something uncanny.

Tony Walter writes that within the pre-Internet age there was a removal of death from the everyday, as death was experienced at a distance in the sanitised and dedicated spaces of hospitals and funeral parlours (Walter, 2015). However, with the development of social platforms on the Internet and the ubiquity of social media, Walter asserts that technology has profoundly changed our relationship and proximity to death. He writes:

social media's user generated content, together with its mobile technology-enabled pervasiveness, has been significant as urbanisation...in changing social relationships, not least in partially reverting to pre-industrial modes of mourning (Walter, 2015, p. 10).

It does need stating at this point that we are considering these aspects in regard to prevailing western cultures, in particular the UK and North America. It is worth noting that these are the cultures of the case studies of this thesis, with other western, eastern, and southern hemisphere cultures embracing death as more of a constant within their communities, regardless of the manifestation of the Internet. Freud, Barthes, and Derrida were writing before we were globally connected at the level we are now, with multimedia beamed into our pockets. As such, we can see a shift from their worlds of thought to the one enabled by Web 2.0 technologies. The Internet, according to Walter, has reverted mourning back to a pre-industrial state, whereupon the online realm takes the place of what he terms the 'village.' This is where mourning moves away from the individualised mourning processes stated by Freud, Barthes, and Derrida, and reverts back into a more socialised form of mourning. However, this is not a socialised mourning of the physically present. Rather, as Juanne Clarke states, we now learn these mourning practices through our engagement with media and the Internet (Clarke, 2006).

Juanne Clarke argues that 'in the absence of personal experience with death people rely on media, among other things, for information, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about death and

its meanings' (Clarke, 2006, p. 154). Anu Harju stitches Walter's point to this idea, stating that:

where modernity cleared death away from the public sphere, modern media in its ubiquitous nature has brought death back into our lives; death, dying, and commemoration are increasingly mediated (Harju, 2015, p. 124).

We can infer from this that, with the proposed idea that modernity has side-lined death in our culture, media depictions of death and mourning fill this absence. Here we need to consider the media as both the broadcast model of television shows, films etc. but also social media and the interactions Web 2.0 facilitates and perpetrates. Ultimately, social media provides 'the domain where existential themes of loss and grief may be addressed or worked through' (Lagerkvist, 2013, p. 9). This is done through the social interaction of these spaces, where even the most disparate communities can connect over loss.

We cannot escape death on the Internet. As early as 2007 Margret Gibson was highlighting the pervasive nature of mourning online with the 'vast archive of virtual cemeteries, memorials, grief chat rooms, grief blogs, and condolence messages on the world-wide-Web' (Gibson, 2007, p. 416). The ubiquitous nature of this mediated mourning showcases how we now come into contact with the learned practices of this space. The world of social media, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, has an internal logic whereby learners experience the unwritten rules and expressions of the space, and this is especially true in mourning. This exposure to digital media helps 'challenge and reshape our existing understandings of the boundaries drawn between life and death' (Meese et. al., 2015, p. 409). We are faced with more death and mourning than we have in the past, as we look to our peers to make sense and collectively share our mourning. Mourning on social media therefore acts by 'channelling and expanding a therapeutic culture that encourages sharing stories and building support networks' (Gibson, 2007, p. 422). When we are in pain, we yearn to know that we are not alone and social media allows for the connection with the other, offering both a space to engage with other mourners and to remediate the memory of the dead.

Social media has allowed us to question the limits of death and when, and indeed where, mourning can and should take place, and for whom. At first glance these are questions of

the ability of the Internet to act as an archive of life, and the ways in which time and the concept of 'now' is disturbed by the continual negotiation between the present and the past. As I discussed in the introduction of the thesis, the Internet has a multitude of times which the user can step into, with people able to engage with and post onto threads, videos, and content from any time in the past. However, through platform vernacular the ways in which we can engage with the platforms are limited by design. There is a privileging of the now, of instant information that is continually refreshed, with older content disappearing into the archive of the Internet. Ultimately, this means that we need to consider that the continual reinstatement of material both allows for the instant reaction to mourning and also the ability of the Internet to forget and move on. But there is always the Internet as archive, as accounts are made into memorial sites, memories are shared on anniversaries, and individual social networking sites offer users glimpses of the material from the past. The dead are not exactly available at all times on the Internet, but there is always the potential to engage with traces of them through the social media presence they left behind.

The Internet as an archive, one that can be accessed at will, leads us to consider how the dead are positioned in these spaces. Social media can be argued to have expanded 'perimortem interactions beyond traditional and temporal and social boundaries' (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 158). As result of this, we can engage with people no longer physically here through the social media detritus they have left behind. The deceased's social media presence is changed after death, with the 'role of the profile shift[ing] from active space to archive' (Brubaker, et. al., 2013, p. 159). Ultimately this means that the space in which we engage with the dead changes from the dynamic continued flow of information, to something more finite. There are contradictions in these ideas as the Internet has at once changed our relationship to the dead by allowing us to transcend temporal and physical spaces to mourn them and to keep them alive, however, if the profile turns from active space to archive, it offers a limit to its temporality, with the active participation of the deceased being severed and only the mourner able to contribute new material.

The differences that social media have made to mourning are, as previously stated, in the observational aspect that this has afforded the mourners. The confrontation with death, and the subsequent mourning, has been 'primarily mediated as vicarious observations rather than as actual real-life experiences' (Wagner, 2018, p. 1). This is reinforced through

the work of other theorists, who concentrate on the mourner being the casualised observer of the death event, rather than an overly active participant (Harju, 2014; Christensen & Gotved, 2015; Walter, 2015). To put this into focus in regards to social media, it needs to be considered one of the ‘new social spaces’ (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 153) that have developed with the Internet, alongside other social spaces that have developed in conjunction with Web 2.0 technologies to allow for death and loss to be negotiated and engaged with. These include ‘social network sites with specific memorial groups, walls, and pages; video platforms; support groups; blogs; forums for mourning and commemoration; and memorial Webpages’ (Wager, 2018, p. 1). Ultimately, this means that social media is not the only, but one of the primary, ways in which death is encountered and engaged with in our Web 2.0 world.

Amanda Lagerkvist states that in the majority of these interactions with the dead, mourners in fact communicate ‘directly with the dead’ (2013, p. 17) and not with fellow mourners. This for Lagerkvist is testimony to the fact that ‘the relationship does not end: it is simply transformed’ (*ibid*, p. 18). This is reinforced by other studies, finding that posters ‘rarely speak to each other and almost always address the deceased user as the primary audience’ (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 154). As such, the mourner is not just positioning themselves in the space of mourning as a social function, but positioning themselves in the social media world to engage with the dead directly. Here we can see a mirroring of Derrida’s ideas of mourning, there is a continuing dialogue with the dead, which prolongs our relationship with the past whilst distributing our ideas of temporality and presence. The power of social media is that these ‘online identities survive the deaths of those they represent’ (*ibid*, p. 152). Thus, the relationship with the deceased flows into our everyday and becomes just another relationship that is maintained through social media. Ultimately, our concept of mourning is not changed but we see a ‘reconfigured rather than an entirely new form of mourning’ (Giaxoglou, 2014, p. 25) on these social media sites.

For Dorthe Christensen and Stine Gotved these continual relationships are practices that have become integrated into our everyday life. The mourning practices are not an isolated experience as we saw with the theorists of the first half of this chapter, instead these mourning practices ‘are not discrete or segregated’ (Christensen & Gotved, 2015, p. 5) from everyday social media interactions. They are instead ‘integrated in everyday life when it

comes to the media, the materiality, and the coping rituals involved' (ibid). Therefore, the 'lifestyle and the deathstyle of present day's mourners seem to coexist' (ibid), with their social media feeds acting as a one stop shop for all of their social interactions, including mourning the dead. Rather than Tony Walter's idea that we have reverted back to the village model of mourning, social media has instead embedded mourning into a casualised everyday activity. The 'everydayness [has] enabled an expansion of [mourning] into other aspects of life' (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 156) as social media platforms have increased 'the frequency with which one will encounter death' (ibid). Ultimately, this means our relationship to mourning within the western world has changed, as we are confronted with the dead in our feeds and with other users mourning them.

The way this mourning is stitched into everyday life is one of the biggest changes that came with social media, as we casualise the notion of mourning and make it a part of our daily routines. It will not be uncommon to see a selfie, a holiday picture, and then a picture of a deceased relative on someone's feed for instance. As such, we have to view this has a shift in not just our behaviour with the posting of these images, but also with our exposure to mourning on a larger and more frequent scale. This has changed how we learn of the deaths of others and positions social media as both a place to receive the initial information and to then mourn. Therefore, 'social media users might intentionally or unintentionally receive information about the passing of an individual or the related mourning practices of the bereaved' (Wagner, 2018, p. 1). This proximity to these events has subsequently changed our collective approach to where mourning sits within our society. Users find themselves either engaging in

mourning practices themselves or are confronted with other people's mourning in the course of their everyday social media use, which leaves them with the decision to either visibly react toward the displayed practices or to dismiss them (Wagner, 2018, p. 1).

This decision underpins how users react in these spaces, when faced with the idea that they either have to acknowledge and engage with the mourning or then in turn dismiss what they have seen. Here we see the social side of social media mourning, with the positioning of these mourning practices inviting others to engage with them, bringing mourning away from the perceived insular practice which was put forth in Freud, Barthes, and Derrida.

Lagerkvist expands on how social media has changed death, stating that within this digital age ‘death is both de-sequestered and deferred – perhaps even to some extent redefined – in and through these digital memory practices’ (Lagerkvist, 2013, p. 9). Within these arguments, we can see that the notion of what is and is not living in these contexts has changed, with the presence of the trace of the human, their social media pages etc., acting as a surrogate for them as a whole. Here we can see the effect here of ‘distributed personhood,’ meaning: ‘a model of the individual which transcends the boundaries of the body’ (Hockey et al., 2010, p. 9). This notion allows us to see how mourning on these sites has changed, with the continual presence of the trace, the distributed personhood, acting as a link to the deceased which can be engaged with at will.

The transcendence beyond the body is not something that is completely informed by the remnants of the dead. There is a co-construction of the dead’s social media presence as mourners use these sites as ‘interactive digital tombstones’ (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 158); whereupon they present their conception of their mourning to the wider community. The users on these sites address the dead directly, allowing them to live on through these engagements with the mourner and the material the dead left behind. However, there is also a social element to this as the ‘communal experience’ (Church, 2013, p. 188) of mourning is strengthened as ‘their personal communications are visible to the entire community’ (*ibid*). Thus, the social media site acts as a both a means through which mourners can address the dead directly, allowing their presence to continue posthumously through digital engagement, whilst also acting as a social and presentation platform for other mourners. A trace of the dead lives on through these engagements as their ‘identities grow as friends add content to the deceased’s profile and weave them into their social networks with images, tags, and evidence of social networking services activities’ (Brubaker et. al., 2013, p. 158). This means that the dead live on through the engagement of the living. Users develop the social media presence of the dead, folding the deceased’s digital objects such as photos, videos, and comments, into their mourning posts.

The platform vernacular of social media allows us to maintain relationships with those we have lost, however it needs to be stated that these ties are distilled into ‘objects of occasional interest’ (Lambert, 2013, p. 87). By this, Lambert is pointing out although the archive of the Internet keeps a record of what the deceased posted, these are buried in the

deluge of information and other active social relationships users are having. Therefore, 'the dead become distant ties, [where] one can check in at key moments of their (past) life' (Meese et. al., 2015, p. 417), such as birthdays, death-days, and anniversaries. What this means is that the dead are linked to the present on these social media sites but only as far as they are in real life. The social media sites are acting as a repository of their lives, such as a photo album or letters to a loved one would act in the past. Therefore, although seemingly self-evident, it needs to be stated that these social media sites are geared towards the mourner and their mourning, rather than the idea of keeping someone alive through concepts like distributed personhood. We are clearly more than the objects we leave behind, subsequently the traces of the deceased on these sites are not fully reformed human beings, but rather, traces through which users can trigger their own memories of their deceased loved ones.

With the ideas outlined above, we can see where the notions of mourning in the digital world come into contact with the previous section of this chapter. Christensen and Gotved juxtapose the digital world of mourning back to Freud's idea of the moving-on method, they state that 'by going online, one can sidestep the offline expectations of fast recovery or perhaps the judgement of being ridiculous and thus unite with likeminded people for support and understanding' (2015, p. 4). The Internet acts as a way to work around Freud's method of mourning, with the user able to take as much time as needed to work through their mourning period, without the outside expectation of moving on after funerals and other key events are held. Within this the mourners are linking themselves to others and finding validity for their pain. The ability for the Internet to prolong the painful initial mourning period, can be seen to be counteractive to Freud's ideas that one must move on after a designated period of mourning.

Ultimately, social media has more in common with Derrida's ideas of keeping the relationship with the deceased alive. In the world of social media, mourning processes are:

not seen as a matter of letting go of the relations of the deceased and moving on but rather keeping hold as a basic condition for moving on. In the logic of this new paradigm, [mourning] is an integration and reintegration process, the aim of which is to establish continuing bonds to the dead that makes it possible for the bereaved to gradually reintegrate themselves into society. (Christensen & Gotved, 2015, p. 4)

We can infer from this that Christensen and Gotved consider that the continual bonds that arise with the archival Internet, allows mourners to in-fact work through their mourning. Therefore, social media's ability to both act as archive of the dead and a presentation platform for mourning, both helps the mourner work through their emotions and provides a memory bank which can be revisited at will. Again, however, I would question how different this is to the pre-Internet mourning which Derrida considers in his writings, as the deceased is seen through memories and the other objects they left behind. I think the difference here is obviously instant recall, but mourning has not changed so much with this, but rather, has allowed for the stitching of itself into the everyday flow of information we consume, as mentioned above.

Anna Wagner distils these arguments down to three ways in which mourning has been influenced by social media, or in her words how 'the expansion of mourning' (2018, p. 2) has occurred. The first of these is 'temporal expansion', where social media has managed to place the immediacy of death into these spaces by 'intertwining experiences of grief and loss with everyday social media experiences' (Wagner, 2018, p. 2). This corresponds with the previously discussed ideas, as the temporal expansion of the Internet has allowed mourners to come into contact with death in an increasingly casualised and informal way within their everyday existence. The second of these is the spatial expansion of mourning, whereupon there is a 'dissolution of geographical limitations, enabling participatory mourning practices not bound to specific locations' (ibid). Social media has enabled mourners to come together without the limitation of being in different locations and time zones, as such, social media acts as a more inclusive space, breaking down certain barriers to access the social space of mourning.

The second point is mirrored in the third aspect Wagner highlights, with mourning being informed by the social expansion that social media has enabled. This social expansion 'is used to describe the unification of distinct social groups through the spread of information related to the passing of the individual user' (Wagner, 2018, p. 2). These points underline what I have previously stated. Social media has broken down the formal experiences of mourning, allowing for a casualisation and more fractured experience of mourning. There is a contradiction in the way it has manifested itself in our lives, acting as both a means to connect and talk to the dead directly, but also as a social space where mourners can

connect with one another. Thus, mourning has been profoundly affected by social media, allowing users to break down the temporal, spatial, and social barriers that have been traditionally there in a disconnected world. This ultimately has made mourning more social, whether through the engagement of the mourners with the trace of the dead or with others in these spaces.

There are contradictions in the ways in which mourning is discussed in these digital spaces, with emphasis on the continual flow of information coming into contact with the Internet as a seemingly endless archive. We have to see mourning in these spaces as existing somewhere in the middle of these ideas. I would argue that people do not continually come into contact with remnants of the dead after the initial mourning period and outside the special occasions linked to the deceased. Rather, the bonds the mourner feels with the dead mirror a hybridised version of both Freud's and Derrida's ideas. The bond is in fact strong and continual through the distributed personhood of the dead but we do not continually engage with this after the initial mourning period. Instead, we are linked through the trace of the dead on these social media sites and can revisit their archive but we are usually too busy consuming other content. However, the previous ideas discussed are built around the personal losses we feel on social media sites, for instance the people we have had one-to-one interactions with, whether that is purely digital or 'irl (in real life)' as the Internet states. All of these aspects also underpin mourning in the celebrity world, especially in terms of the spatial expansion, where mourners can now engage informally with the mourning of celebrity at will and in an increasingly casualised way.

### ***2.3.3. Disenfranchised Mourning and the Musician***

In the previous sections I have highlighted how social media is used to mourn people we knew on a personal level or within the immediate sphere of our friends. There is a social element to this, but, as both Lagerkvist and Brubaker have stated, the mourner in these spaces is addressing their social media posts to the deceased. As I have pointed out, I do not believe social media has fundamentally changed the ways in which we mourn the people close to us, however, this is changed when we consider the parasocial relationships we have

with media figures. Social media at its heart is social. It offers a space in which disparate communities can gather, exchange media, and meet people outside of their 'irl' social circles. When we move the lens from considering personal mourning to something akin to collective mourning, we can see where social media changes drastically from the ways in which we mourned prior to these developments. Social media 'offers fans a space for public mourning and a welcome sense of belonging' (Harju, 2015, p. 125) when the people around them do not understand the mourning they are going through. When we hear that someone's close family member or friend has died, we are struck with the power that this will have over the person feeling this loss and as a society, and human beings, we sympathise with this. However, when a celebrity dies, we do not have the same spirit of sympathy towards the fans that are feeling the loss as dearly as they would a close family member. Within this next section I am going to discuss how social media has changed the way in which we engage with disenfranchised mourning (something I define below) and the parasocial relationships that underpin it.

#### ***2.3.4. Parasocial Relationships and Death***

As I discussed at length in the Introduction to this thesis, the Internet has allowed for the development of intense parasocial relationships between the celebrity and the fan. Using Giles' model of parasocial interaction, the Internet has broken down levels of artifice that now these encounters operate as 'first order' parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002, p. 294). The social structure of the Internet has facilitated peer-to-peer interactions with the celebrity as well as an engagement with fellow fans that was inconceivable when parasocial relationships were first theorised. However, with this new close proximity of celebrity and the subsequent parasocial relationship that this entails, there is a change to how these relationships are then mourned. Joshua Meyrowitz first described this phenomenon as the 'parasocial breakup' whilst examining fan's reactions to the deaths of famous celebrities (1994, p. 63), with fans holding vigils and other spontaneous memorials as a means to honour their dead 'media friend' (*ibid*). This can express the pleather of the parasocial media relationship, with fans mourning the loss of fictional characters as well as celebrities.

Jimmy Sanderson and Pauline Cheong expand on this idea, identifying it as ‘parasocial grieving,’ whereupon fans are ‘mourning for the loss of a celebrity with whom [they] had parasocial interaction’ (2010, p. 328). These ideas build upon on the same assumption, that when a celebrity dies the parasocial relationship that existed with the fan then turns into mourning. Although both build on this, it is worth noting that perhaps parasocial grieving is a better definition for this interaction, as the relationship continues with the trace of the deceased, as I have mentioned above.

The ideas of both the parasocial breakup and also parasocial grieving owe a debt to the work of Kenneth Doka and his concept of ‘disenfranchised grief’ (1989). This is expressed when someone ‘incurs a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported’ (Doka, 1989, p. 4). Jocelyn DeGroot and Alex Leith expand on this idea, stating that disenfranchised grief occurs when society doesn’t recognise the relationship between the mourner and deceased, such as ‘the death of an extramarital affair partner’ (2018, p. 202). Doka defines this socially exclusionary mourning in regards to our shared norms, or as he terms them ‘grieving rules’ (Doka, 1999, p. 37). The concept of disfranchised grief ‘recognises that societies have a set of norms – in effect, “grieving rules” – that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve’ (*ibid*). We can see this in how certain celebrities and public figures are positioned within our psyche and how and when we are able to mourn them. For instance, following the death of Princess Diana, the royal family were criticised for not mirroring the unwritten rules that the rest of society were following: showing signs of emotion, attending vigils, amongst other things (Kear & Steinberg, 1999). As such, they were seen at odds with the mourning of the moment, going against the unwritten rules of public mourning.

The loss of a parasocial relationship can be defined as disenfranchised grief.<sup>1</sup> Meyrowitz claims that mourning a media friend becomes difficult due to the inability to attend the usual societal expressions of mourning such as funerals and religious services (1994).

DeGroot and Leith continue with this, stating that ‘when a parasocial friend dies, society

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<sup>1</sup>For reasons outlined at the beginning of this chapter, I am going to replace the word ‘grief’ in Doka’s term and instead use ‘disenfranchised mourning’ to mean the same thing. This will be done for the sake of continuity going forward.

does not recognise the loss... as a “real” loss, and they do not provide social support for the bereaved’ (2018, p. 209). As such, the roots of this disenfranchisement lies with the personally experienced, emotionally charged relationship with the celebrity that shapes the sense of self, and in the deeply affective dimensions of this relationship not understood by others, but often ridiculed (Harju, 2015, p. 129).

Previously, the loss felt at the death of a celebrity was therefore underpinned by the frustration of having to mourn alone. The stronger the parasocial bond, ‘the more acute the [mourning] experienced [is] when the attachment is dissolved’ (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 645). In the pre-Internet age, parasocial mourning has been defined by the absence of community and the frustrations, and disenfranchisement, which comes along with this. However, social media allows for us to engage with other fans, something that has previously been much harder. Ultimately this means that parasocial mourning, much like parasocial relationships as a whole, have become easier to navigate through the online world.

We see the concept of parasocial mourning play out in the ways in which celebrities are mourned online. Celebrity deaths have ‘increasingly gained significance as the means through which collective and public forms of mourning are ritualised’ (Gibson, 2007, p. 420). It is through the media, and subsequently now social media, that mourners have been able to find ways in which to make sense of their parasocial mourning. The media ‘not only channels desire but also [mourning]’ (*ibid*), showcasing the celebrity and the expectations of mourning that come along with this. The three aspects of expansion are manifested here, as social media has allowed for the temporal, spatial, and social expansion of mourning to occur, giving more legitimacy to other forms of mourning. This is reinforced through work on social media, mourning, and the celebrity. Celebrities bring mourners together in their name, seen particularly in Sanderson’s and Cheong’s work on Michael Jackson and how his death forced users to ‘defend Jackson’s character and perpetuate his legacy’ (2010, p. 338) in the face of different social media opinions. The confrontation of this parasocial mourning arises something within the mourner as there is a ‘will and desire to record one’s own or a significant other’s existence in the face of death and its annihilations’ (Gibson, 2007, p. 422). Using the space to work through and present their own versions of the celebrity, whilst trying to find relief from the disenfranchised mourning they are feeling.

The rejection felt by the mourners previously, is instead met with the validation of other fans who use these platforms to also mourn their losses. Therefore:

These platforms give users the opportunity to pay respects and express their grief, to give and provide social support by interacting with others who are bereaved, or to simply reduce loneliness by observing others' grief and feeling a part of a larger community of mourners. (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016, p. 645).

As we saw in the previous section, social media has allowed for the continuation of social bonds that would have previously been severed by death. This is the same with these parasocial relationships that are expressed through parasocial mourning. The celebrity may have died, but the social media platforms allow us to both consume the media that they left behind whilst also finding solace in the mourning of likeminded fans. Ultimately, this has changed parasocial mourning in the sense that it is no longer a disenfranchised aspect of mourning, rather it is an accepted part of the fan experience. Just as these platforms have stitched the mourning of the personal into the everydayness of the platform, so too have they permitted for parasocial mourning to be available to the fans who would have otherwise been disfranchised by their loss.

Mourning has not just been changed from the individual level. Instead, the ability for disenfranchised mourning to find legitimacy in this space, has reinforced the casualisation of the ways in which we engage with celebrity death. Mourners have taken the 'initiative and by deliberately, if spontaneously, co-constructing a space of mutual solidarity and community, they render their [mourning] legitimate and make their sentiment visible to others' (Harju, 2015, p. 142). This has allowed for the expansion and continuation of mourning in the space of social media, as users find that their previously secret emotions are validated by others in these spaces. Harju reinstates this with the idea that fans in these spaces are actively 'fighting against and forcing their way out of the disenfranchised place allocated for them by others' (*ibid*). Thus, social media has given rise to this visibility of this type of mourning, as mourners engage with the social functions afforded to them to embrace their parasocial and disfranchised mourning.

## 2.4. Conclusion

Mourning a personal friend and mourning a celebrity online are different. However, the ideas set forth in the first section of this chapter, through Freud, Barthes, and Derrida, inform how we can theorise mourning online. Freud's ideas can be seen in the platform vernacular of these social media sites, with the ever-changing flow of information able to help with the work of mourning and the removal of the dead from the mourner's perception. Barthes' focus on the image, gives us the tools to consider how the image-based social media platforms can be seen within the mourning process. As Barthes centred his loss on the refusal, or in his words the betrayal of moving on, so too the continual presence of images of the dead online can have a similar effect. The concept of parasocial mourning gives heed to Derrida's ideas of the continued bonds through which we engage with the dead.

Social media has not fully changed the ways in which we mourn. Instead, it has given rise to different conceptions of the behaviours seen before. I would dispute that mourning has changed in the ways Tony Walter claims it has, however, the ubiquity through which we can, and indeed do, engage with mourning is something new. The casualisation of this mourning does not parallel that of the villages of the past, but rather it is something new, something that has stitched itself into the endless flow of information and media we consume. Therefore, we shouldn't think of it as a reverting back to an old model of the village, where people had specific roles for the mourning of someone who was built into their community, but think of it as a different type of ubiquity. By this I mean mourning has indeed become more prominent in our cultural consciousness, but the lack of rooted physical presence, the online traces of the dead, and the casualised nature of the social media site, has created a new type of socialised mourning.

## **Chapter 2. The Blackstar: Narrative, Myth, Late Style, and the Mourning of David Bowie on Reddit**

### **3.1. Introduction: The Blackstar**

The introduction and Chapter 1 of this thesis highlighted the ways we can theorise and understand mourning, social media, and the relationship between the fan and the artist. This chapter considers how this relationship is manifested in the aftermath of the death of the artist, with particular focus on narrative and myth on the social media site Reddit. The Blackstar persona presented by Bowie in his final album and singles helped structure his fans' mourning process. These last acts of artistry offered fans something onto which their mourning could be structured, allowing space for them to work through mourning via Bowie's presentation of his own death. This chapter explores how these displays of mourning were considered through Bowie's Blackstar persona and how this was used by fans for the formation of their own mourning identity.

For this study, two different comment threads were chosen in two separate subreddits (themed Reddit boards) – r/music (2016) and r/indieheads (2016) – each focusing on the announcement of Bowie's death. By looking at these posts, this chapter will study how the persona of the Blackstar is created in the users' initial expressions of loss and mourning. Firstly, in section 3.2., this chapter will examine how Bowie has been considered as a persona throughout his career, focusing primarily on his post-1990s shedding of characters and the assumptions of authenticity which were embedded in this move. Secondly, section 3.3 will consider the concepts of how narrative and mythology integrate within our society. Thirdly, in section 3.4. narrative and myth will be contemplated through the concept of mourning and how narratives are constructed in the aftermath of loss. Finally, this will be looked at through the lens of social interactions on Reddit in section 3.5., looking at how these posters used Bowie's Blackstar in their mourning.

The *Blackstar* album was released on January 8th just two days before Bowie's death (2016). In the aftermath of this release and Bowie's death, a posthumous persona was created with *Blackstar* at its centre. Throughout Bowie's life, a series of narratives allied to authenticity were constructed and maintained in fan's negotiations with him and his music. The concept of persona allows us to see how these are manifested and understood through both the presentation of the artist and how the fan constructs their own identities. In the narrative of Bowie's death, he is the empty vessel, where authenticities can be inscribed by different participants. It is in Bowie's death that the *Blackstar* persona encompasses and frames the narrative of his passing. It becomes the means through which we engage with Bowie's death and life in the present, bringing his past authenticities and personas into focus in the posthumous moment.

### **3.2. Authenticating David Bowie's Persona(s)**

David Bowie was and is constructed through his personas. When he died on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2016 his physical body may have perished but his personas lived on. Persona is a narrative discourse consisting of multiple layers of image, text, and music, formed by various subjectivities and perspectives including fans, the press, and the artist themselves (Auslander, 2006). Simon Frith states that a 'star personality' (Frith, 1996, p. 186) is built into the music we consume, informing all of our engagements with music objects, the musician, and fandom. These engagements happen on multiple levels, from the press (Black, 2017), to fans (Cinque & Redmond, 2016), and historical analysis of Bowie as a cultural object (Critchley, 2016).

Bowie exists as a balancing act of competing narratives, selves, and characters, which produces the artist we consume. The overarching narrative of Bowie's past is constructed around the changing personas he has performed (Perrot, 2017; McLeod, 2003; Reed, 2017; Bennett, 2017). These changing personas permitted Bowie to 'see the world and talk/sing about it through a different point of view' (Leorne, 2015, p. 121), whilst seemingly expressing originality to his fans, the press, and other artists (Reed, 2017; Perrot, 2017; Stevenson, 2015). The narrative of his changing selves is now ingrained into the histories

and experiences connected to Bowie and our relationship to him on both a cultural and personal level. When we think of Bowie, we are likely to think of Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, the Thin White Duke, and the Goblin King. These are a complex mix of myths, characters, and competing influences of the fans, the press, and the notion of Bowie the man. A musician's persona is just this, a concept tied up in a balancing act between competing narratives of commercialisation, audience, and artistic intentions played out through artistic works, mediated and remediated objects, and performance (Auslander, 2006). Simon Frith states that persona functions as a 'site of narrative' (Frith, 1996, p. 205), which underpins how we see and judge the musician's work and public self.

We can consider that the narratives of Bowie's life are constructed through the negotiation of different Bowie personas. In the broadest of brush strokes, we can view Bowie's career through the authenticities he is constructing and performing. In Allan Moore's deconstruction of authenticity in popular music, he outlines three ways in which authenticities are manifested in and around the popular music artist: first person, third person, and second person authenticity (Moore, 2002, p. 209). The first person authenticity is seen when a performer 'succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form' (Moore, 2002, p. 214) to the audience. As such, it can be seen to be the persona of authenticity, of seeing something 'real' and 'true' in the performer. Third person authenticity 'arises when a performer succeeds in conveying the impression of accurately representing the ideas of another, embedded within a tradition of performance' (Moore, 2002, p.218). It is the authenticity we see embedded in folk traditions and the discourses which surround genres associated with national or cultural identities.

Second person authenticity sees the artist giving 'the impression to a listener that the listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is telling it like it is for them' (Moore, 2002, p. 220). The performer here is the conduit for the audience's thoughts, feelings, and authenticities. It does not matter if the performer is not true to themselves, as they are representing truth to the audience. For the purpose of this chapter, focus will be placed on the first- and second-person authenticity. Philip Auslander states that a musician's persona is constructed by the tensions between 'the press, the fan, and the artist themselves' (Auslander, 2006, pp. 115). Therefore, it stands to reason that the persona is

also formed by the tensions between these authenticities, as they manifest themselves through different elements of the performer's career and life.

Bowie's personas can all be seen through the lens of first and second person authenticity. The narratives which have been attached to Bowie's early works - Ziggy Stardust, The Thin White Duke etc. - are ones which reflect an authenticity of feeling, one based in raw emotion, for the audience. The overarching narrative of Bowie's life can be seen to be in two parts, underpinned by two different authenticities (Critchley, 2016; Usher & Fremaux, 2015). The first was pre-1990s, where Bowie was still seen as a multitude of characters (Ziggy Stardust etc.) This is established as second person authenticity, whereupon the character Bowie is playing is seen as a performance but is welcomed by the audience as a reflection of their own identities (Critchley, 2016; Reed, 2017; Perrot, 2017). This second person authenticity was manifested through the Bowie which 'inhabited his albums' lyrics but also developed mainly through the performance of his songs on tour and the related video performances' (Marshall, 2017, p. 570). Bowie was this 'stage persona' (Marshall, 2017, p. 570) which constructed and permeated the multimedia manifestation of the artist.

This began to change from the 1990s onwards, as Bowie strategically moved away from obvious displays of persona, to embrace a first person authenticity, a 'true' reflection of his self. He was followed up to this point in his career with this narrative, one which existed on the premise that he was a fake, but exhibiting some sort of 'true' feeling, or 'true' reflection of what the audience needed to hear or see (Critchley, 2016). Usher and Fremaux suggest the narrative of Bowie's work and persona of this period tipped towards a perceived authenticity of his true self (Usher & Fremaux, 2015). Through their analysis of press articles of this period, Usher and Fremaux highlight how the narratives being constructed around Bowie's personas were formed upon 'a cathartic cleansing of performance of characters' (Usher & Fremaux, 2015, p. 57). This cleanse allowed for the manifestation of a perceived authentic Bowie, free from pretence, where he 'shed layers of artifice which his previous persona had required' (Usher & Fremaux, 2015, p. 57). From the 1990s onwards, this narrative was attached to a Bowie who was perceived as shedding his personas and uncovering the real man underneath. The concept of persona helps us understand how this is enacted. Celebrities offer their audiences the chance to create and maintain their own personas by offering possibilities to the fan (Marshall, 2017). As people engage with the

narrative of Bowie's otherness, they see a chance to enact their own identities in the mirror of Bowie's (Critchley, 2016; Leorne, 2015; Reed, 2017; Perrot, 2017).

First person authenticity can show us how Bowie and his music was considered not just in this period but also up to his death. The 1990s shedding of characters reinforces the idea that throughout his career Bowie was showing a piece of his true self within all of these characters. This narrative allows the audience to engage with a perceived 'true' Bowie, reinforcing their own identities in the process, as Bowie is seen to be reflective of a true self, an authentic identity underneath the façade. In the 1990s he renegotiated his approach to performance and identity, but this too was a musical persona, a performance of authenticity constructed through fans, Bowie, and the press (Usher and Fremaux, 2015). This continued with the release of Bowie's final albums *The Next Day* and *Blackstar*.

### **3.2.1. *The Blackstar Persona***

*Blackstar* (Bowie, 2016) was released on January 8<sup>th</sup> just two days before Bowie's death. Prior to this, the album *The Next Day* signalled Bowie's return from a long break from music, seeing Bowie in perceived self-reflective mood (Bowie, 2013; Stevenson, 2015). *The Next Day* was seen as marking a further turn towards authenticity and self-reflection for Bowie, but this was not mirrored in the reception for *Blackstar*. The cleanse seen in the post 1990s work, was side-lined in the videos for the songs 'Lazarus' (2016) and 'Blackstar' (2015) which established complex imagery whilst playing with genres. However, this album was seen as a continuation of Bowie's artistic endeavours and reinstated Bowie's persona as one which reflected the outsider, an artist who takes risks and who is not stuck in one genre or way of expression. He was seen to have separated from his previous work; as one *Guardian* review of the *Blackstar* album put it prior to his death, 'It's a rich, deep and strange album that feels like Bowie moving restlessly forward, his eyes fixed ahead' (Petridis, 2016). As such, the *Blackstar* period was not seen as a reflection of the self, prior to his death, but as a reinstatement of Bowie as a consummate and ever forward-facing artist.

It can now seem obvious, with hindsight, where the Blackstar persona came from. However, on its release the visual elements of both the song videos and album were hard to decode. The word Blackstar was first heard being screamed by Bowie at the end of the title track, with Bowie claiming, 'I'm a Blackstar' (Bowie, 2016). With hindsight we can see that this was Bowie bringing a new character to life, a character that would frame his death. This was reinstated on the album cover, which was the first of Bowie's albums not to feature a picture of the artist himself, but rather just one image, a black star. This, coupled with the videos for 'Lazarus' (2016) and 'Blackstar' (2015), reinforced the idea that Bowie developed a new persona substituting himself, the artist, for the iconography of the Blackstar the image. There is speculation about the origins for this, with a lost Elvis record about death stalking a man being one of the most prominent, reinforced in the official documentary of this period *The Last Five Years* (2017). However, it is important to note that all of this is retrospective, informed and only now understood in the aftermath of Bowie's death. Prior to this, this persona is a barely formed character by Bowie's own standards; it only becomes clear in death, becoming a posthumous persona.

Although these two different authenticities represent different periods in Bowie's character development, they both exist simultaneously in our cultural understanding of Bowie in the present. Both of these narratives of authenticity are constructed, maintained, and used simultaneously in our negotiations with Bowie and his music. The concept of persona allows us to see how these are manifested and understood through both the presentation of the artist and how the fan constructs their own identities by mirroring them. All of our engagement with Bowie is through persona, whether through the lens of second or first person authenticity; there is always a character of Bowie to consume. In these narratives, Bowie is the empty vessel, where authenticities can be inscribed by different stakeholders. It is almost impossible to construct a full history of Bowie's personas as they adapt, change, and grow with each fan interaction and each new story told. Therefore, by considering Bowie through the two authenticities discussed, we can begin to see how some fan cultures understand and relate to the different narratives offered by Bowie's personas. However, death changes everything. The next section will consider how narratives are constructed posthumously and how this made Bowie the Blackstar.

Following a musician's death, these mourning narratives are established through the artist's representatives, the press, and the discourses shared between fans. There is a continuity between a musician's persona construction and these mourning narratives (Auslander, 2016). The narrative of Bowie's death was a continuation of the ideas being established prior, the first person authenticity, the reflection backwards, and the turn towards a 'real' Bowie. Nick Stevenson, in his deconstruction of Bowie's *The Next Day* album, states that Bowie's later career began to follow a late style narrative (Stevenson, 2015). This has been further reinforced by Bowie's death, while a retrospective understanding of Bowie's career can trace a line from the first person authenticity of the 1990s to his last two albums. Late style is attached to a period of an artist's life, near death usually, where 'there is a marked shift in style and mode that is typically characterised as at the same time a form of life review' (McMullan, 2019, p. 61). The art produced 'is not generically-bound; it is personal, essential, autobiographical; it is a supplement to the main body of the artist's work which is also a fulfilment of that work,' (McMullan, 2019, p. 61) coming to represent late style as an 'authenticator of genius' (McMullan, 2019, p. 62).

Gordon McMullan claims that many cultural commentators understood the reaction and the narrative of Bowie's death through the concept of late style. The narrative both underscores Bowie as a genius and also reframes his late works as ones of intention, reinforcing the late style narrative that this work is 'profoundly personal and redemptive' (McMullan, 2019, p. 62). McMullan is critical of this however, and states that we should consider different narratives in Bowie's posthumous moments. Ultimately though, the Blackstar persona became the overriding narrative and is seen in the shadow of late style as being 'an authentic personal negotiation of age and death by a consummate artist' (McMullan, 2019, p. 67). Thus, by viewing Bowie retrospectively through the lens of late style, we can see that the Blackstar persona propagated Bowie's death as authentic. As such, the Blackstar comes to symbolise the late style myth constructed around Bowie. It reinforces Bowie's genius, reflection, and even redemption in the eyes of the fans, as Bowie did not just represent his own death but the mourning his fans will subsequently go through, something which will be discussed later (Stevenson, 2015).

The first person authenticity reflection of Bowie in this myth is seen almost exclusively through the persona of the Blackstar. The timing of the album release and Bowie's death

offers narratives of mourning which construct a connection to late style. This has become the overriding story of Bowie's last years and is continually reinforced through discourses which surround his death in the press, as well as the documentaries with his collaborators (Black, 2017; *The Last Five Years*, 2017). It is also important to note here that in the documentary about this period of Bowie's life, *The Last Five Years*, there were counteracting narratives from the producer of the 'Blackstar' and 'Lazarus' music videos who didn't know Bowie was unwell and claims credit for visual representations of death and sickness in the music videos, particularly a hospital bed in the video for 'Lazarus' (*Last Five Years*, 2017). These visual clues have since been used as a way to reinstate that Bowie was constructing and performing his own death. A glance at the comments underneath the YouTube videos of these songs confirms this, with emphasis on how the visual elements heralded Bowie's forthcoming death (Bowie, 2015; Bowie, 2016). We see the continuity of both late style and mourning narratives at work in this, as the provenance of these ideas take a backseat in favour of the idea that Bowie constructed this world himself.

In summation, Bowie's last albums and his Blackstar persona allowed fans and the press to side-line any narrative other than one which positioned Bowie as self-reflective, authentic, and genius, who confronted death with art. Thus, Bowie joins a long list of artists who have curated their own death through their work, and as such the press and the fans can make meaning of Bowie's death. If the Blackstar persona underscores a first person authenticity of death, then the late style narrative allows us to see how this was structured into his death. But how did this persona affect the ways in which fans mourned his passing and, in turn, contributed further to his persona.

### **3.3. Narrative and Myth**

To understand how the personas in section 3.2. were considered on the platform of Reddit, we need to reflect on how the concepts of narrative and myth manifest on social media in the posthumous moment. Stories are what make us human. They are the 'mythical glue' (Harari, 2014, p. 42) which holds our societies together. This glue functions as a way of understanding and ordering the world around us. Narratives inform our memories, give

form to our knowledge and experiences, and underpin our interactions with our sense of self and community. Fredric Jameson states that narrative is an 'all-informing process' which is 'the central function or instance of the human mind' (Jameson, 1981, p. 13). Humans have for millennia used stories to make sense of the world around them, whether through myth, memories, or fables. We have a shared resource of narratives and tropes which reinstate themselves throughout our lives. Stories 'contextualise events in terms of narrative structures with which people are already familiar' (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 4). We grow up with these stories and learn to construct the events of our lives through the narratives engrained into our everyday interactions through narrativization. The act of narrativizing reinforces the society's values and highlights what each social group holds valuable.

Narratives do not arrive to us fully formed. They are brought about by a cultural need to make sense out of disparate ideas and events. Hayden White discusses narrative as multiple strains used to 'produce the effect of having filled in all the gaps, to put an image of continuity, coherency, and meaning in place of the fantasises of emptiness, need, and frustrated desire that inhabit our nightmares about the destructive power of time' (White, 1980, p. 15). As White points out, narrative allows the ability to establish a coherent story around fragments. This ability to produce coherence is one of narrative's main functions, establishing 'constellations of relationships (connected parts) embedded in time and space, constituted by casual emplotment' (Somers, 1994, 616). We can see that emplotment, the establishing of history into narrative plot, is a key facet of how we order the world around ourselves. By situating our everyday interactions through narratives, we are allowing ourselves to make sense of the world through a series of narrative forms available to us. Stories, memories, anecdotes and eulogies are all forms of narrative; they operate as a means of conveying information, values, and meaning between humans and in our own minds. Narrative acts by smoothing over the incongruent nature of events and in doing so it structures how we remember, mourn, and evaluate our lives.

What narratives we tell, where, and how are underpinned by our cultural surroundings. To understand how this is manifested, we must consider the idea of myth. Myth and narrative are closely aligned yet separate concepts. Myth, in the Barthesian sense, allows us to decode our surroundings to find the hidden meanings within everyday narratives. Narratives

give form to the stories of our lives; they organise chaos into understandable and digestible formats. Myth on the other hand, represents what these narratives come to mean in our society. In his collection *Mythologies* Roland Barthes demonstrates this with the French national dish of *steak frites*. For France, Barthes argues, this dish is more than just food, it is representational of all France's history and how they wish to be seen by themselves and others (Barthes, 2009, p. 62). Myths are draped onto the narrative strains that weave throughout our society. Myth acts in the same way narrative does, it structures the messages we engage with throughout our lives, giving meaning to the stories around us. Both are structural ways to order events, however, narrative can have structure without myth, but myth cannot have structure without narrative. Narrative can be considered as the raw data of our stories; it is a means via which shards of ideas can be collated and seen as a whole. On the other hand, myth is the cultural meanings, layers, and connotations that narratives acquire as they are established in the stories around us.

Myth is socially constructed. Just like narrative, myth is 'used to understand our existence and to create our own sense of value and order in the world' (Kelsey, 2017, p. 2). It provides the all-important context to the narratives we employ throughout our lives. This is a continued negotiation between the personal and collective narratives that permeate our culture. We can see this in the previous example highlighted by Barthes. The object, a dish of *steak frites*, functions as the expression of French identity but it can also function as a funnel for personal memories linked to biography and events in our individual pasts. As such, myth gives structure to 'the formations and articulations of our minds and our thoughts are in constant negotiation between the personal and collective stories we experience' (Kelsey, 2017, p. 3) Narrative and myth co-exist in this space, constructing a coherent story onto which we can navigate our identities. We cannot escape the kind of everyday myths that Barthes analysed; they are reinforced throughout our lives as we engage more and more with the cultural milieu around ourselves. Narratives are therefore not just the mythical glue which binds our communities together but rather a base upon which myths of our society can be constructed. This is especially true when we consider the mourning process.

### 3.3.1. The Mythscape

It needs to be stated at this point that the definition of myth that this thesis uses is closely tied to the one presented by Roland Barthes in the above example. The definition of myth used here highlights how 'myths do not simply evolve unguided without active agency' (Bell, 2003, p. 75). Instead, they are constructed with purposes in mind, whether that is transferring meaning, evoking a certain identity, or reframing a certain event. Myth and narrative do not differ very much from each other in this context. They both operate as a way to 'flatten the complexity, the nuance, the performative contradictions of human history; [they] present instead a simplistic and often univocal story' (75). However, they do this on different levels. For the purposes of this thesis, I am going to use narrative to suggest the information being put across by certain stories and events. On the other hand, myth acts as a way to contextualise the narrative, giving it meaning in society. To bring this back to Barthes' *steak frites*, the narrative of this could be the history of the dish, who is eating it, but its wider meaning as a symbol is explored and deployed by myth.

The continual establishment of myths in our society builds upon what has been characterised as the 'the mythscape' by Duncan Bell (2003, p. 66) while considering how nationalist myths are ingrained into our daily lives. The mythscape represents:

the temporally and spatially extended discursive realm wherein the struggle for control of people's memories and the formation of nationalist myths is debated, contested and subverted incessantly (Bell, 2003, p. 66)

This is the same for all of the myths and narratives we use. The mythscape evolves and develops as we move through our lives and inhabit different ages and cultures. It is also situational, with multiple layers of myth and narrative stacked on top of each other. Consequently, we need to view the mythscape as a 'perpetually mutating repository for the representation of the past for the purposes of the present' (Bell, 2003, p.66), all the while utilising events, narrative, and myth to filter both the perceptions of ourselves and the perceptions of others. This linking of narrative and myth ascribes the mythscape with the power to offer continuity, meaning, and simplicity while dealing with disparate events.

These events and memories both contain a central narrative and myth which develops throughout our culture. To place this into context let us consider the event of the Blitz in the British national identity. The narrative of the Blitz is one of devastation, of a systematic destruction of the towns in the UK through a continued bombing campaign by the Nazis. This is the simplistic narrative of these events and distils the sporadic information of the period into an easily digested sentence. But myth here, in the Barthesian sense, focuses on the countries' approach to this destruction and the national character. In the myth of the Blitz, the UK shows a resilience like no other country, uniting and fighting back through the character of its citizens. 'The Blitz Spirit' has since been utilised throughout our lexicon to hark back to this period, reinforcing the myth and establishing this as the memory of these events. We can see with this example that myth offers context, specificity, and application to narrative threads.

Narrative and myth function in similar ways in the space of the mythscape. This concept allows us to see how these myths and narratives are fed into our daily lives. They act as a resource through which narratives and myths are debated, stored, and engaged with throughout society. We can bring this back to Barthes' *steak frites*. They are a symbol, a resource, on which narratives and myths of French identity can be constructed. The mythscape offers the place on which this identity can be ingrained into the public psyche. As such, it stands to reason that the mythscape takes many shapes and forms throughout our own engagement with popular culture. For instance, in Barthes' case the mythscape was both the identity that *steak frites* evoked to the people of France and the people looking at French culture from the outside. Narratives and myths have different functions depending on whether someone is receiving or telling them. The myth of *steak frites* can be as useful to the French as a way of showing their own identity to themselves than to others. Ultimately, narrative and myth function in multiple ways and on multiple levels in the space of the mythscape, showcasing whichever story is needed at that point.

### 3.4. Narratives and Myths in Mourning

Mourning is a narrative event of someone's life. The stories we tell each other of the ones we have lost structure both their biography and the ways in which we remember them. As previously stated in section 3.3., narratives are formed from the shards left behind.

Narratives are integral to our understanding of death. In the post-death moment, there is a scramble for meaning, for coherence in the face of disparate thoughts, feelings, and events. By contextualising death in the act of narrative, mourners are ordering traumatic events into a familiar format. These narratives therefore allow for an 'account that condenses a complicated set of events and perceptions into a single comprehensive unit' (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 10). In celebrity death, any ambiguity is ironed out through the establishing of a cohesive narrative, as the media, the artist's representatives, and the fans look towards a central meaning in an artist's death. Anything which does not fit the narrative is filtered out with the 'details adapted, ignored or changed so that the story being told has the desired effect' (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 9).

As established previously, myth and narrative are intertwined in our establishment of highly emotive stories. The stories we construct in our mourning capture the emotions that help 'individuals and families gain control over the events, relieve emotional tension, make meaning out of experiences, and connect different people's experiences of the events' (Bosticco & Thompson, 2005, p. 7). Narrative exists in mourning as a way to order the events in a time of high emotion, establishing a cohesive story through which mourning can be conducted. In these narratives, emphasis is predominantly placed on the 'deceased's positive characteristics' (DeGroot & Leith, 2018, p. 5), as mourning narratives construct a story of life. Narrative is intertwined with myth in this act of mourning. Instead of trying to produce a true and reflective narrative of life, there is an emphasis on what the deceased's life comes to mean to the ones they leave behind. Constructing narratives is an emotional event, this is especially true when we consider the narratives of mourning. Darren Kelsey calls these constructions of emotion in stories 'affective mythologies' (2017). These are myths which are ingrained with a high level of emotion as 'we are constantly affected by the experiences, interactions, exchanges, information, knowledge, encounters, memories, and connections that we develop in our lives' (Kelsey, 2017, p. 3). These myths give emotional

context to the narratives of mourning as they manifest themselves throughout the mourning process, constructing the post-death moment.

The link with affective mythologies shows us that the narratives presented in the aftermath of death are a means of coping with loss. The high emotional states which mourning provokes, stated in Chapter 1 of this thesis, mean that the emphasis on a coherent narrative when mourning is integral. These affective mythologies in death ‘open us up to the hypothetical, they help people clarify and explain events’ (Brockmeier & Harre, 1997, p. 281). As part of the affective mythology practice post-death, emphasis is on actively participating in presenting and engaging with narratives of the dead. These narratives are myths in the ways they present whatever the viewpoint of the receiver, playing on their cultural standing, emotions, and biography. For instance, when Princess Diana died the mourning narratives were tinged with loss and the expressions of emotion intertwined with the biographical stories presented (Kear & Steinberg, 1999). This is reinforced in mourning literature. In Freud’s ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, mourning is seen as a process, one which is ‘worked through’ via the strategies of narrative and displacement (Freud, 1917). As Anthony Elliott points out in regard to the mourning of John Lennon, Freud’s theory allows us to see how mourning is attached to creative acts of emotion, ones which are ‘integral to the process, often unconsciously, of mourning lost love’ (Elliott, 1998, p. 6). As such, constructing narratives and stories via emotions in the aftermath of a death, gives mourners the cathartic release of creativity, as they create, engage, and consume narratives and myths of mourning.

Narrative and myth in mourning become even more pertinent in the aftermath of a celebrity death. This is seen as a way of ‘sense-making,’ of drawing meaning from the death of a celebrity (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Radford & Bloch, 2012a). The narratives act in the same way they do for personal mourning by giving form to highly emotive shards of information. As discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis, the parasocial emotions and disenfranchised grief which arise with the death of a beloved celebrity hit mourners just as hard as the deaths of close relatives. As such, knowing what happened and what their death could mean for themselves and society is integral in the mourning process. This mirrors Freud’s working-through method of mourning as emphasis is placed on structuring a coherent narrative which gives meaning to the death. It is at once a creative act but also one

which requires the mourner to be powerless in their disenfranchised grief. Narratives help to connect disparate communities together and give form and structure to events which may feel confusing. This can manifest in different ways, including the celebrities' biography, output, and circumstances of the death. Death changes how we consider and approach the position of a celebrity with the last words, acts, and products embedded with an added resonance (Cohen & Hoffner, 2016; Kavka & West, 2010; Magee, 2014; Radford & Bloch, 2012b). Emphasis is placed on the positive aspects of the celebrities' career as fans construct narratives and myths which satisfy their disenfranchised grief.

The narratives of mourning are an exercise in narrative limitation, which seek to find a dominant and satisfying narrative that adds continuity to the deceased's life. The stories we construct and privilege in the aftermath of death shape our mourning and the legacy of the lost. When a celebrity dies, there is a scramble to piece together official and unofficial narratives of death. These two distinctions represent the different levels in which narratives of the dead are constructed posthumously. Official narratives are established through press releases, family members, and the press, while unofficial narratives are constructed through conversations between fans, in person or on social media sites. Neither hold more or less sway in the realm of social media and, as we have seen in the discourses around Elvis Presley since his death, there is always a blurring of these two elements in the artist's legacy in our collective consciousness (Rodman, 1996). These acts of mourning narratives and myths are constructed from multiple aspects of the deceased's life and their death event. These include cause of death, legacy, personal affect, and myths. This is all filtered through the narratives the person, or persona, has been associated with in life. But through these narratives and myths we make sense of the artist's death, the audience's own mourning, and the co-construction of the posthumous persona.

### **3.5. Mourning David Bowie on Reddit**

Reddit allows for the space of the narrative of mourning to develop over longer form posts and engagement with the artist's persona. As I discussed at length in the introduction of this thesis, the longer form posts of Reddit's platform vernacular give the user more space to

express and construct complex narratives. From the first section the concept of late style allows us to see how Bowie's Blackstar persona was incorporated into the narrative and myth of his death. The construction of persona, as Auslander and Marshall have stated, is a product of not just official narratives but ones formed by peer-to-peer interactions, especially on social media sites. As such, it is important to consider fans' response to this persona and how their interactions in social media spaces underpin, construct, and inform the ways persona is understood in the posthumous moment. This section will consider how the Blackstar persona was received posthumously on Reddit and how fans used this persona in their expressions of mourning. This will be achieved by considering a sample of posts which have been collected and anonymised from two Reddit threads, r/music (2016) and r/indieheads (2016), on 11th January 2016, breaking the news that David Bowie had died.

The two posts on these two threads construct in-depth second stories which blur the line between collective and personal memory (Page, 2012). As discussed in section 1.5., Reddit's platform vernacular allows for the immediate engagement with current events and after a certain period these threads become archived, allowed to be seen but not to be engaged with. Considering mourning narratives are affective mythologies in these spaces, so it stands to reason that these Reddit threads become 'archive of feelings' following on from Ann Cvetkovich's work on trauma (Cvetkovich, 2003). They become a snapshot of a certain place and time, of narratives and myths tied up in a public display of affect.

If we then turn to the two posts announcing Bowie's death on the subreddits r/music and r/indieheads, we see how these narratives structure mourning in the space of the social networking service. The comments on these subreddit threads cannot be easily placed into clear and distinctive categories. Rather, they blur between tenses, narratives, timeframes, and personas. Bulck and Larsson found that Bowie was primarily discussed in terms of his previous personas on Twitter (Bulck & Larsson, 2017). Although this is present on Reddit, the immediate period of posthumous narratives shows an overwhelming amount of the posts concentrated on the Blackstar and how Bowie used this in his death. One of the most prominent themes in these threads is the poster's uses of tense in regard to Bowie. Bowie exists in both the present and the past, with his personas acting as a means through which the posters engage with the man himself and his death. The posts ranged from short 'RIP Starman,' referencing Bowie's Ziggy Stardust, to more complex and evolving narratives

(r/music, 2016a). For instance, one user posted: 'It's apparent now his final album was 100% centred on his coming death and the duality of his human mortality and legendary stardom immortality' (r/music, 2016a). This poster concludes with 'David's a Blackstar, a dead star... and Bowie is an immortal Lazarus' (r/music, 2016a). Bowie is considered as both the artist who lives on and the physical body who is no more, separating the man from his personas.

### **3.6. Retrospective Intention**

The posters on these threads demonstrated an in-depth understanding of Bowie's usage of personas through his various characters. One user, while positing their disbelief of Bowie's death, muses on this subject: 'Bowie has put many of his selves to rest over the last half-century only to rise again with a different guise' (r/music, 2016a). This post is then bookended by them stating that the Blackstar self must end with a 'resurrection' which will be an artistic statement that would be 'hard to follow' (r/music, 2016a). We can see that there is a high level of persona literacy in this online space through posters' engagements with the multi-layered persona of Bowie. This becomes an integral part of the mourning process and the poster's approach to mourning Bowie. At the heart of this literacy is the idea that Bowie's death has been shaped and underscored by the Blackstar. As discussed previously, it was never a fully realised persona in Bowie's canon, however, it provides the central understanding of Bowie's death in this space. The separation between the body and the persona highlights the understanding these mourners have of complex issues of mourning and the star. The narratives and subsequent myths offered by the users both allow us to mourn the loss of the body but also establish the role of the persona as a separate and semi-autonomous entity.

Bowie's past personas are integrated into the Blackstar in this space. This is highlighted by one poster at the end of their post thanking Bowie for all of his previous personas and work: 'Thanks for Low, Heroes, Station to Station, Ziggy Stardust and the rest of your fantastic music' (r/indieheads, 2016). This linking together comes at the end of a long paragraph placing emphasis on Bowie's Blackstar as a fitting and meaningful last piece of work for Bowie as an artist. Therefore, it stands to reason that Bowie needs to be considered as a

comprehensive persona in these spaces, with the narrative and myths exuding from his death being a representation of the full Bowie and not just his last work. However, whilst looking at the posts in these spaces we see the over emphasis on the Blackstar as the mourning persona. The proximity of the album to his death and the subsequent eulogising of the symbolism at play discussed previously, allows the Blackstar persona to become the persona of this space, dictating how the posters direct their mourning.

As discussed previously, the late style aesthetic that the Blackstar represents in this space is one which is formed retrospectively through narratives and myths. This retrospective narrativization is manifested through the posts on these threads as users seek the continuity that mourning narratives produce. This is underscored by one user stating that: 'only now do we realise that Blackstar was intended as his final incarnation: David Bowie as a dead man' (r/music, 2016). Throughout the posts on this thread, there is an emphasis on retrospective realisations of what Bowie's last work meant to these mourners. They welcome the realisation that Bowie had used his last work to embrace death, acting as a cathartic release not just for himself, but for his fanbase. Attached to this retrospective understanding of Bowie's Blackstar as a narrative object is the idea of intention. The intention narrative manifests itself through the authenticity of Bowie's late style, a continuation of the first person authenticity seen in his post-90s era and his later works. This narrative of intent allows for the continuity and the meaning which is integral to the mourning process.

Intention is underscored by one user stating, 'Lazarus sounds like he wrote his own eulogy now' (r/indieheads, 2016). This is mirrored throughout a majority of the other posts on these threads. There is a retrospective understanding that the Blackstar was the means through which Bowie was communicating his impending death. This characterisation allows mourners to engage with Bowie as a powerful persona, rather than a sick man who died in a hospital, highlighting a first person authenticity as theorised by Moore (2002). We can see this in posts which reference his star immortality and their disbelief, even refusal, to entertain the thought that Bowie was mortal. The late style narrative of reflection, introspection, genius, and authenticity is all present in these posts. The first person authenticity is manifested in this appropriation of the Blackstar, where Bowie was seen to

be presenting his own death, reflecting his own thoughts, feelings, and a posthumous persona to the audience.

The intention narrative is itself a myth as it constructs a set of events through narrative into something which symbolises something wider for the fans. For instance, one poster frames Bowie in this act as a trickster, placing his death as a magic trick he has knowingly pulled on his fans:

But let's take some solace in this. David Bowie, like all of us, had to go someday. And what an exit - an album that had everyone gushing adoration not because he was terminally ill - who knew? - but just because it was fabulous. Two fantastic music videos. Lyrics and images with so many cryptic hints that managed to elude us all, yet seem so telling in retrospect.

What am I getting at? Well, Bowie did it again. He pulled the rug from under us one last time, perhaps more arrestingly than ever before. One final transition that had us guessing to the end (r/music, 2016a).

In this post, Bowie is talked about as having used his knowledge of his forthcoming death to not just frame the Blackstar persona, but to also give the fans something to cling onto in the wake of his death. The Blackstar is placed as Bowie 'doing it all again,' tricking the audience again as he remodels himself into something new. This riffs on Bowie's previous personas who were seen to have played with fans' expectations and places the Blackstar in the same vein as a surprise reinvention of the self. The user highlights the retrospective nature of this interpretation and places Bowie as the genius who structured it all. In this deconstruction Bowie is playing on the first person authenticity he was seen to have adopted in the latter years of his career. Even though he is deemed to have been deceitful to his audience, he was doing so to show something truer to the fan with his death. The first person authenticity runs through the intention myth constructed by his fans. Within this they are taking the Blackstar persona to be a faithful reflection of Bowie the man.

### **3.6.1. Retrospective Narrative and First-Person Authenticity**

Reddit users are openly embracing Bowie as an untrustworthy narrator, however they do so in a way that shows that they knew all along he was representing a first person authenticity of the self. This is built on the past reincarnations of Bowie's personas and highlights that these were deemed to have been Bowie playing a role. All his personas had within them the narrative of authenticity, building and representing the myth of Bowie as an artist of multiple personas but all with a 'true' Bowie lurking underneath. One poster ends by reinforcing this position, stating that "this is the exact kind of death that Bowie would have wanted," and that with this act he was reinforcing himself as a 'genius' (r/music, 2016a). This is continued by another user who remarks how this act was a reinforcement of Bowie's artistic vigour and how he:

could of [sic] just sat quietly for the last 18 months of his life but instead he decides to make a great album and straight after his work is finished he dies, what a perfect way to go (r/music, 2016a).

The myth of the Blackstar is reinforced within all these posts through the reinstatement of Bowie's intention to make this his final work. At the heart of all of these interpretations is the users trying to reinforce the fact that Bowie somehow knew and meant for the Blackstar to be received in the way it was. There is a collective effort to retroactively place Bowie as the orchestrator of his own demise and with this the intention myth is created, framing all of the subsequent negotiations with the Blackstar persona and Bowie's death within it.

The need for the mourners to believe this intention myth is prevalent throughout a majority of the posts on Reddit. One user exemplifies this by stating that it was a 'real blessing that he was able to hold on until the album was released' to die (r/music, 2016a). However, this is framed as to highlight that it was 'good to know that the critical acclaim was 100% legitimate and not just sentimentalism' (r/music, 2016a) when it came to the reviews of Blackstar, rather than a concern for Bowie's health. The poster uses the excuse of Bowie's welfare to reinstate their own ideals within the situation, tying their own thoughts and feelings into the reception of Bowie's music. Here solace is taken in knowing that Bowie was loved when he died and that the last act of intention, his death, has not falsely altered

people's opinions on his music. This is an integral part of the poster's mourning process, knowing that the thing they loved when Bowie was alive is not changed or tainted with his death. They are highlighting how Bowie's intention myth, the way that he wanted to go, was not some form of "sentimentalism" but rather an act that was worthy of critical acclaim and thus their own admiration.

Ruth Page states that these narratives and subsequent myths are reinforced on social media spaces by collective action. Even the least active participants in these spaces 'can be active co-authors' (Page, 2012, p. 2). This in-turn makes these Reddit posts part of a 'multi-party, co-constructed narration' (Page, 2012, p. 3) of Bowie's passing, with each post building on the other. As such, the dominance in this space of the intention myth is because it is continually reinstated by each poster. Each different take on the myth is a contributor to the whole as users spark off each other to cultivate a continuity of narrative. Due to Reddit's platform vernacular, the intention myth begins to be the dominant narrative in this space. In this Bowie is at once the genius trickster, the powerful artist, the constructor of the perfect death, and the authentic artist. The intention myth is a myth because it symbolises something beyond the narrative of Bowie's death. It reaches into the core idea of what these users wanted Bowie to be and what they saw within him. This is an important step in their mourning process as they use their previous knowledge of Bowie, through his authenticities and past personas, to construct and engage with the Blackstar persona after his death.

### **3.7. Late Style and Leonard**

The intention myth upholds the idea that Bowie meant for his death to be consumed in a certain way, although this was not necessarily a given. As previously stated in the introduction of this thesis, we can view Bowie as the 2016 catalyst, the watershed moment which positioned Bowie as the referential figure which underpins the subsequent celebrity deaths in 2016. When we contrast the Blackstar persona, Bowie, and the appropriation of late style, with the mourning of Leonard Cohen on Reddit, we see a number of similarities. Although Cohen commands a unique persona in popular music, something which will be

discussed at length in Chapter 4, mourners on Reddit continually linked Cohen and Bowie in their posts following the death of Cohen on 7<sup>th</sup> November.

The pattern of late style followed by the intention narrative is reinforced in the mourning posts around Cohen's death on Reddit. One user immediately places the artists in direct comparison with each other, opening their post with:

David Bowie gave us Blackstar, Leonard Cohen gave us You Want it Darker. Two excellent albums by two excellent artists as last gifts before they left us forever  
(r/music, 2016b)

The myth of Bowie's 'last gift' permeates even into the mourning of Cohen's death and reinforces Bowie's 'deathstyle' (Christensen & Gotved, 2015, p. 5). The intention narrative constructs and uses the myth of the last gift, to establish the thread of the late style narrative framing Cohen in the aftermath of Bowie. As such, the myth of the intention, the last act, is reinforced. By linking the Blackstar persona into Cohen's mourning, the user is further legitimising the myth of Bowie's passing, utilising it as a trope in the mourning of Cohen. This link reinstates users mourning of Bowie, allowing them to 'check in' and reorientate how they mourned earlier on in the year. In this act the myth of intention is refocused in the mind and the Blackstar persona is utilised as a means of 'making sense' of users' mourning.

Perhaps there is an argument for Cohen foretelling his death in a more obvious and less obscured way as Bowie's Blackstar through the presentation of his declining health. But for these users the two artists represent one single myth. Although Bowie and Cohen were both very different artists, the construction of their death has been presented in remarkably similar ways. As such, this influenced and reinforced the ways in which they were mourned. The Blackstar acts as the blueprint onto which discussions of Cohen's last album are placed. This is underlined in another mourner who linked the two, stating that 'just like David Bowie, Leonard Cohen was experiencing something of a renaissance' (r/music, 2016b). Late style narratives are continually reinforced in this space, with both artists set into the narrative of self-reflection, renewal, and intention which this trope produces.

The time difference between these two deaths, reinforces how the narrative of late style, the gift, and the intention myth, moved through 2016 and became an easily understood

trope, or deathstyle, which can be evoked at any time. The term deathstyle in this context comes from Christensen & Gotved's work on mourning and the Internet, where they discuss the deathstyle as something that is presented online alongside the 'lifestyle' of the user, highlighting *how* someone dies (2015, p. 5). These narratives and myths tie together the mourning of these posters and give them something which can be easily brought forward, also giving them something which they can express and grasp their mourning immediately. In this way, these narratives and myths are used as means of Freud's moving-through method, linking disenfranchised grief together with a process in which mourners can adapt to quickly. In 2016, the Blackstar persona gave mourners the narratives and myths to easily cite and use in these spaces, framing and moving along the work of their mourning. Therefore, the timing of the deaths is an important facet to these narratives and myths, with the Blackstar cultivating an intention myth which permeates Cohen's mourning and other artists who have died after Bowie.

The platform of Reddit becomes the space in which these narratives continually reside, creating a vernacular of the site. A shared store of narratives and myths is enacted in this space, with late style and the intention myth manifesting themselves as tropes which can be reused and recycled when other artists die who fit the bill. In this way it is a mythscape. It constructs, maintains, and reinstates the myth of late style from which the users can draw to frame their mourning processes. The mythscape acts as a way of linking the death of the artist, the mourner's grief, and the artist's biography in a display of mourning. As the Blackstar came to represent a certain manifestation of late style artistry and mourning, so it became a link which other users could use to frame other artists' deaths.

The linking of the two artists creates and maintains a mythscape in this space. Via Reddit's platform vernacular, the intention myth dominates these two threads. This is reinforced through the mutual understanding that this is the only narrative of Bowie's death and anything else will not be heard. The personas inhabited by the posters follow this thread, with diverting voices punished with silence. A continuity of mourning is constructed in this act, as users increasingly enable one another to believe that the Blackstar was Bowie's way of telling them of his death. Believing that he constructed this himself allows users to think of his death, as one user points out, as a 'great way to bow out' (r/indieheads, 2016). The narrative gives Bowie's death meaning for these users to pin their mourning onto. This is

where the narratives of social media and the process of mourning intersect. In these threads, the cohesive story of Bowie's intention dominates the posts. The structure of Reddit does not allow for what Moore, Barbour, and Lee term the performance of the self, as age, gender, race is all hidden through the semi-anonymised structure (Moore, Barbour, & Lee, 2017). However, these posts highlighting intention underline how interaction between personas on social networking services 'can quickly become a pattern of action which then becomes routine, creating and then normalising a narrative of expected behaviour' (Moore, Barbour, & Lee, 2017, p.4).

### **3.8. Personalising Myth**

By linking Cohen and Bowie together in the late style and intention myth, the Reddit mourners are utilising the events as a way to engage with their own mourning process. The intention narrative and myth hold within them a mass personalising of mourning through mourners posting first-hand recollections of how this death has affected them. This manifests itself in different ways throughout the posts, with some adopting a first person language while others focus on how Bowie's and Cohen's deaths make them consider their relationships to their family members. With Bowie, the intention myth situates the Blackstar persona at the heart of the mourning process as users use this persona to highlight something within Bowie they want to emphasise. However, Bowie, the persona, is disconnected in a significant number of posts throughout these threads, with mourners highlighting their own biographies ahead of Bowie's.

Up to this point, the narratives and myths have concentrated on Bowie's persona and legacy, situating the Blackstar as a way to engage with Bowie in the posthumous moment on his terms. These posters however, neglect to position Bowie at the centre of the mourning, sometimes even negating to mention Bowie at all. This is done through autobiography, where Bowie is a conduit through which their own biography can be performed. One poster sums this up by stating that: 'I wasn't nearly ready for this. I remember thinking he looked pretty well in the Blackstar video. I was really excited because he still managed to be weird after all these years' (r/music, 2016a). They end their post with: 'I was hoping he would go

on tour after the new release because I never had the opportunity to see him live. He's one of my favorite artists of all time. This really sucks' (r/music, 2016a). These posts reflect the user's engagement with affective mythologies, positioning themselves at the heart of the myth as a means of cathartic emotional release. They do this while simultaneously associating themselves with Bowie's past personas as a way to tie themselves to the capital the Blackstar persona has in these threads.

The mourners are using the event of Bowie's death, and the subsequent mourning, to look into themselves, negotiating their own feelings and finding ways to express them. As I have outlined above, the users in this space work together to create a cohesive narrative and myth with different users acting as co-authors of the final thread. Mirroring what Anthony Elliott states is the creative act of mourning discussed previously, these mourners are actively engaging in the myths created in these spaces as a means of working through their own mourning (Elliott, 1998, p. 6). By inserting themselves into the myth, the mourners are tying themselves to the artist and encouraging others to consider what Bowie meant to them on a more personal and authenticating level. The high emotional elements of the narrative of death converts this into an affective mythology, where the user engages with the intention myth on a fundamental human and emotional level.

The mourners ultimately turn the myth inwards tying Bowie's death to their own biographies, their own personas. This is highlighted by one post that states that Bowie's death has made them question their own and their families' mortality: '[Bowie's death] Makes me very contemplative, and worried about the short term future of my parents and the medium term health of my husband who is in his 40s' (r/music, 2016a). Here the poster ignores the work of the intention myth which centred on a celebration of Bowie's death as an artistic act. Rather, they are concentrating on how Bowie's death affected the ways in which they see their own family. Bowie's death is immaterial to this poster, in many ways it could have been any celebrity in that moment. This is reinforced by a comment directly below this which lists a random collection of celebrities who died within the few years previously - 'Leonard Nimoy, Terry Pratchett, Christopher Lee, Lemmy, Robin Williams' - while ending the comment with 'it is all too much man' (r/music, 2016a). In these posts the mourners are not mourning something about Bowie that they are missing in the moment but rather they are mourning something which Bowie comes to represent. In many ways

these posters are showing something brazenly which the other mourners are showing more discretely. They are always mourning a part of themselves.

P. David Marshall states that celebrities offer the users on social media sites ways in which they themselves can approach their persona construction (2010). This may explain why the intent narrative was so enthusiastically undertaken by the users in this space. It reflected something within the mourners themselves, how they believe they would act given the circumstances, facing death with dignity and artistic flare, going out on their own terms. We can see this in the way in which one comment was downvoted to the point of being hidden in the thread in r/indieheads (2016). In it a user states: 'dying of cancer is definitely not peaceful i [sic] watched my grandma die from cancer right up till she passed and she was not peaceful, keep dowvoting [sic] me' (r/indieheads, 2016). As this did not continue the narrative being established in this space, this post was hidden from the thread. Users did not just want to believe this for Bowie's sake, but also their own. The persona of the users was under attack by the opposing narrative, therefore it had to be cut away from the thread, reinstating the intention myth for all.

The downvoted and disappeared comment about cancer shows us two things in this space. It at once shows us what the posters did not want to see on the board where they were considering Bowie, but it also shows what the posters did not want to consider for themselves. They are co-authoring the myth of Bowie's death in this space and with it they are highlighting the aspects of it which appeal to them. By seeing that the affective mythologies that are being discussed focus on the mourner's pain rather than Bowie's, tells us a great deal. Bowie is steeped in the myth of intention and with it any ideas which deviate or take away from this are seen as dangerous to the myth's continuity. In a way all of the posts are affective mythologies for the purpose of personal mythologising. The community work together to create a continuity of myth and narrative which reinforce the prevailing official narrative line of the online community. The Blackstar persona evokes both the feelings of admiration and denial as users want to see themselves in the act of intention but do not want to contemplate their own mortality.

### 3.9. Conclusion: Reddit as The Mythscape and the Archive

Mourning is a time for reflection. It stands to reason that the death of a much-loved artist allows the audience to turn the introspection onto themselves. This is seen throughout posts on Reddit in micro narratives on illness, identity, and autobiography. Instead of multiple micronarratives which differed from the official media narrative surrounding Bowie's death, this chapter found that the mourners in these threads maintained and reinstated Bowie as a curator of his own demise (Black, 2017; Bulk & Larsson, 2017; Stevenson, 2015; McMullan, 2019). They did this through the persona of the Blackstar which allowed them to meditate thoughtfully on Bowie's life, whilst reinstating the late style idea that Bowie's last act was one of intention, of first person authentic reflection. The Blackstar is interwoven with this intention myth. The analysis of Reddit shows how it becomes the means through which mourners can consider Bowie as a genius, as not a man coming to the end of his life, but rather an artist who foresaw and curated his own death in an authentic artistic act.

Mourning is also an exercise in persona construction. The users on Reddit underscored the official media narratives of Bowie's passing while also adding further to the collective idea of Bowie through the intention myth. Anything that did not underline the Blackstar as one of intention, artistry, and genius for curating his own death was buried in Reddit's platform vernacular. Instead of a pluralistic set of narratives and myths you would expect to see on social media sites, there is a heavy consensus of myth in this space, mutually understood, and collectively policed. The myths come into conflict with Reddit's own understanding of itself; instead of being a place that is open to discussions, in these mourning posts there is an emphasis on a collectively authorised narratives and myths. In this approach Reddit does not differ from other social networking services, as differing opinions and differing narratives and myths are rejected by the collective. This is a myth of not just Bowie's persona, but the one of the fans who are mourning.

Reddit offers a dual purpose in the mourning of artists. It is at once the mythscape onto which myths are produced, reinstated, and engaged with. We can see this with the way the intention myth surfaced again in the mourning of Leonard Cohen, building on the myth of

Bowie's Blackstar persona, and situating the mourners in a previously used myth. Reddit also represents the archive of feelings. Due to Reddit's unique platform vernacular these posts are locked within a small amount of time, with users no longer being able to engage with them. This makes these posts an invaluable insight into the minds of mourners in the immediate aftermath of these deaths. As we can see manifested in the mythscape, the archive of feelings acts as a store highlighting how mourners constructed their own affective mythologies in this space, while co-authoring the intention myth. This allows the user to be part of establishing a coherent narrative in this space but also allows them to engage and indulge their own mourning process.

Thinking of Bowie as this persona, which is separated from the body, offers a release. The posters do not have to face the reality that Bowie is dead, they can however celebrate the fact that his personas still exist in the work he created, in a death he chose. There is solace in this, as fans make sense of not just Bowie's death but their own. This is reflective of the ways Bowie made them feel when they first heard his music, through both second and first person authenticity. David Bowie represented a certain lifestyle to these mourners and in death he comes to represent a certain 'deathstyle' (Christensen & Gotved, 2015, p.5) in which they can recognise, and mourn, a part of themselves. We can understand through the concepts of authenticity outlined in section 3.2. that Bowie is at once indicative of how some musicians are mourned, but also is special in the different ways his various personas are manifested in this mourning. This is what makes the Blackstar persona so unique, it is at once symbolic of Bowie's constantly changing personas, but also allows mourners to connect Bowie to previous tropes of late style mourning. This is further juxtaposed in Chapter 4 of this thesis as Bowie is deemed to have exuded a different type of authenticity than Leonard Cohen but was considered to be treading the same persona path.

## **Chapter 3. “You Have Been Loved”: George Michael and the Sites and Sights of Mourning**

### **4.1. Introduction: You Have Been Loved**

Mourning is at once very personal and highly social. Whether that is through gatherings at funerals or via online social media sites, mourning is done with, by, and for people. Chapter 2 of this thesis discussed how the narratives of mourning are engaged with and written on the social media site Reddit. However, these expressions of mourning do not just manifest themselves in text-based spaces such as Reddit, they are also visual. As discussed in section 1.5. in introduction of this thesis, each social media site has a unique platform vernacular which underpins the ways in which users can, and do, engage with content. In this next chapter I am going to focus on how mourners used the social media site Instagram to mourn the death of George Michael.

George Michael died in his Oxfordshire home on Christmas Day 2016. In the immediate period after his death fans descended on both the site where he died and his home in Highgate, London. Within both spaces spontaneous shrines appeared, with fans leaving flowers, notes, candles, and many other objects in the spaces directly outside each home. These spontaneous shrines are a facet of mourning celebrity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they have been described as a ‘place where people come to mourn their losses together and in public’ (Granek, 2017, p. 268). By looking at these sites, the behaviour of mourners, and objects left at this shrine, this chapter will consider how the mourners of George Michael used both the sites and sights of the shrine to mourn him.

This chapter is split into three sections: section 4.2.: ‘Spontaneous Shrines or Temporary Memorials?’ discusses how we can view these shrines in a theoretical way. This allows us to see how we can view presence, ephemerality, and use of objects in these sites from a

theoretical and historical perspective. Section 4.3, 'Authenticating George Michael's Persona(s)', discusses the persona of George Michael, from his early days in Wham! in 1983 to the schism that arrived with his arrest and legal troubles for soliciting sex in 1998. Section 4.4, 'Mourning and Evocative Objects', considers the site of George Michael's shrine and the objects that were placed there. Through the discussion of these objects, it will be possible to consider how the mourners used the space of the shrine to both showcase their mourning identity and the ways in which they want George Michael to be mourned.

#### **4.2. Spontaneous Shrines or Temporary Memorials?**

Although George Michael died at his Oxfordshire home, his primary Highgate residence became the site to which fans flocked to pay their respects. The history of mourning celebrities has always had physical sites into which people congregate, public spaces where people express the loss of a well-known figure. From Valentino's death in 1926 when thousands took to the streets to express their mourning (Ellenberger, 2005), to Princess Diana's funeral which saw the famous 'fields of flowers' outside of her birth home (Kear & Steinberg, 1999), the loss of a celebrity manifests in a physical space. This section describes how we can theorise the way these spaces are constructed, what objects and materials are left there, and how these spaces are remediated on social media.

When a celebrity dies, mourners turn to the legacies, visuals, and physical spaces which embodied the celebrity to understand and formulate their emotions. A physical space in which mourners can congregate, organise, and express themselves becomes an integral part of the mourning process and narrative. In these spaces there is a need for the mourner to visit, to see, feel, or consider themselves in a space that is associated with the loss they are experiencing. The need to visit is a manifestation of the 'wish to be near the essence of a person they never knew, to celebrate and reminisce a tie not personally experienced' (Bickerdike, 2014, p. 129). This need to manifest the loss into something physical underpins the reactions, and indeed interactions, that these mourners have with these sites. As Jack Santino points out, these acts of public mourning place the 'deceased individuals back into

the fabric of society, into the middle of areas of commerce and travel, into the everyday life as it is being lived' (Santino, 2006, p. 13).

There are a plethora of explanations and terms to help describe these sites in mourning literature. Jack Santino terms these 'spontaneous shrines,' where there is an assemblage of objects that 'appear in public space and command public attention' (Santino, 2006, p. 55). These spaces are a 'ritualesque public event' (p. 60) where people meet up and cultivate shared expressions of mourning and culturally understood displays of objects. Erika Doss (2010) continues this with her concept of 'temporary memorials', and her work on expressions of mourning in American culture. She marries this concept with the idea of materiality and the ways in which these sites of mourning expression are places of objects and of physical presence. As such, both the physical space that is being inhabited by the mourner and the objects they leave behind become intertwined, with all elements combining to create the public event of the spontaneous shrine.

Sylvia Grider (2001) takes up Santino's framing of spontaneous shrines and elaborates upon it, stating that they are most certainly shrines rather than memorials. She claims that:

1. the sites function as sites of ritual pilgrimage and are, therefore, sacred shrines rather than secular memorials. They emerge quickly, often within a few hours of the event. In contrast, memorials come later and express a quieter, more deliberate, and usually official response. Memorials are often intended to be permanent and are aimed toward a future audience; spontaneous shrines are ephemeral and have an immediate audience. Memorials are much more passive; the spontaneous shrines are extraordinarily dynamic.
2. These are pure expressions of public sentiment, spontaneous shrines are unmediated folk-art assemblages with no official guidelines or restrictions regarding where the shrines are placed or what they contain. At first glance, they may appear to be chaotic, but closer inspection reveals a coherent organizational principle in the arrangement of memorabilia which usually results in an aesthetically satisfying appearance (Grider, 2001, p.3).

With this definition the idea of a spontaneous shrine allows us to picture these spaces as sacred, meaningful, and ephemeral. Although these sites can both be considered through

Santino and Grider's definitions of the spontaneous shrine and Doss' temporary memorials. For clarity going forward I am going to use the concept of spontaneous shrines to encompass the whole of these activities. This term encompasses the secular nature of a musician's shrine sites and places emphasis on both the ephemeral nature of these spaces and the objects which exist there.

The purposes of these sites are both straightforward and complex. They exist in the liminal space between public and private mourning, memory, and space, where mourners both express their own emotions but also engage with the expressed emotions of others. They also have a practical element in the mourning process; importantly they 'help to mediate the psychic crisis of sudden and often inexplicable loss' (Doss, 2006, p. 298). With the name 'spontaneous shrines', we are led to believe that this is an expression of mourning that is hastily arranged and hectic in its manifestation. However, they are 'highly orchestrated performances of mourning, codifying, and ultimately managing [mourning]' (ibid). Their spontaneity is 'only in their origination, in their swift response to sudden and unexpected events of tragic and traumatic death' (ibid). The presence of the shrine in a location may be of a spontaneous nature, but the construction, objects, and behaviour of the mourners is an orchestrated act of learnt behaviour.

These shrines do not abruptly spring up in any place connected to the dead; rather, Grider claims that there are certain conditions or behaviours which come together before these shrines come into being. First is location; there needs to be a place where these sites can be accessed, and more specifically, there needs to be a 'prominent vertical surface, such as a fence or a wall, on which arrangements of memorabilia can be displayed' (Grider, 2001, p.3). Furthermore, they usually 'develop as close to the site of the disaster as feasible' (ibid). In the case of celebrity deaths, these shrines can be placed at the site of the death itself, as with Marc Bolan and John Lennon, or at the place where a celebrity's home can be accessed, as we see in Figure 4.1 at George Michael's Highgate Home, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Although everyone is mourned by somebody, there also needs to be what Judith Butler terms 'grievable life' (Butler, 2009), whereupon the deceased was either a well-known celebrity or died in high profile and exceptional circumstances, such as terrorist attacks or road traffic accidents (Grider, 2001, p. 2). As well as this, there is often an absence of a publicly accessible grave and traditional site of

mourning expression. With this absence of a grave, 'each shrine reflects the community most heavily and immediately affected by the event' (Grider, 2001, p. 3). Therefore, the objects, placement, and spaces in which these are placed become a reflection of not just the dead but the mourners too. However, the most important condition is that it is ephemeral, a space that only exists for a short period of time.

The idea of ephemerality permeates these sites. Both the emotional value and the objects fade with time, as Grider points out: 'Shrines are temporary. Spontaneous shrines lose their emotional impact and symbolic integrity when they become soggy, windblown and tattered' (2001, p. 2). This underlines the way the sites of these shrines are time specific. The conditions of these shrines are therefore underpinned by the ephemeral nature of these sites, allowing for spaces to be adopted and then discarded at will, bringing the private into the public and then retreating again. The ephemeral nature of these spaces adds to their emotional value. They exist as a site of instant emotional expression that is available to the mourner. Both Santino and Doss emphasise the idea of presence in these spaces, whereupon participating in these shrines is an act that needs to be done quickly and be felt physically in the moment (Doss, 2006; Santino, 2006). As such, the immediate release of mourning relies on the condition of ephemerality for these spontaneous shrines to exist within the moment of initial mourning and to fade with time as emotions soften.

#### ***4.2.1. Presence and Sociability***

Erika Doss states that these sites are 'defined by the present, [they] only exist in the present moment and its performative tense, even if [they] make reference to the past or the future' (Doss, 2010, p. 158). Presence matters in these spaces as they are the physical embodiment of the loss felt. The physical, tactile, and social elements of the shrine are integral to the public feeling towards it. Doss continues with this by stating that these shrines are completely defined by being physical spaces which need to be seen and felt by the mourner. They are 'aggressively physical entities: spaces that must be walked around (literally if they block a sidewalk or occupy vast acres in a park) and demand our physical interaction. [They are] destinations: places to be visited' (Doss, 2010, p. 74). Here we see the interlocking of

both ephemerality and presence as they meet at the heart of these shrines. As a result, they are time dependent, physically present, and infused with a tactile element that brings mourner and non-mourner alike into their orbit. These conditions of ephemerality and presence are the backbone of the spontaneous shrine. They are an immediate expression of mourning but just as Grider states, after the flowers die their emotional impact wanes and the world moves on to a different site.

Within these spaces of physical manifestations of mourning, there exists the social element. Sociability is engrained within these spaces from their onset, as there is a scramble to make sense of both the loss of a physical body and the things this person represented within the society. Take for instance the scenes we saw after David Bowie's death in Brixton (seen in Figure 4.2), whereupon thousands of mourners descended on Brixton to mark Bowie's passing and to pay tribute to him collectively. This heavy emphasis on the collective, the social side of mourning, underpins Tony Walter's observation that we, as a western society, are now re-entering the village phase of mourning, where through social and mass media there is a returning of death into the public consciousness (Walter, 2015).

The conditions of the shrine, what is left, and even how the deceased are mourned, are contingent to how the figure was perceived. Santino reflects that in each spontaneous shrine, 'the deceased individual's identity will be constructed according to the needs and nature of the group involved' (2006, p.56). We can see this in action by looking at two very distinct examples: David Bowie and Margaret Thatcher. Within the mourning of Bowie at the Brixton shrine through clips posted on YouTube, there was an emphasis on music and the singing of Bowie's music in a communal way (Gritsch, 2019). It makes logical sense that the mourning of Bowie would come through the medium of song and focus on the collective and positive power that Bowie represented to the groups at the Brixton shrine.

In the space of the spontaneous shrine, being present and interacting with the crowd is important. People find that they are 'among likeminded people and gain support, emotionally and physically, by joining the crowd' (Gritsch, 2019, p. 1453). Sociability in this space becomes an act of validation, it is about being seen by others in this space and indeed being seen to be mourning. As such, these mourning 'fans can gain direct social interaction with their community, which validates their emotions and reaffirms their identities' (Courbet & Fourquet-Courbet, 2014, p. 285). Within this sociability there is a level of

performativity, where being there and being seen to be there sit at the intersection 'between ephemerality and performativity' (Doss, 2006, p. 160). This links into the idea of the parasocial relationship, and allows mourners to highlight and feel validated for both their parasocial relationships and their parasocial mourning. As a result of this, mourners feel that their emotions can be expressed, moving the parasocial mourning from the private into the public sphere.

The ability to be in the space of these shrines and alongside other mourners is a very powerful force. Grider states that these shrines are a 'metaphoric threshold which [represent] the end of numbness and the beginning of the ability to take action' (Grider, 2001, p. 2). Both the ideas of presence and sociability allow this threshold to be reached, as mourners engage with the area around the shrine and the other people within it. They sit and contemplate and in turn they give form to the abstract notion of mourning. As Valerie Gritsch points out, fans in these spaces don't just walk past, 'they linger. They read the messages other fans have left behind, take photographs and videos, and share them online – thus expanding the reach and power' (2019, p. 1459) of the spontaneous shrine.

#### ***4.2.2. Materiality of the Shrine***

Both Doss and Santino highlight the materiality which underpins these shrines and the free and ephemeral nature of their construction. These shrines follow in a long history of expressing mourning through the display of objects and the materiality of this expression. Roger Abrahams (1981) links this into the culture of 'things' and the showcasing of objects in 'public occasions' where 'accumulated feelings are channelled into contest, drama, or some other form of display', which includes 'actions and objects [that] are invested with meaning and values [that] are put [on] display' (Abrahams, 1981, p.303). This is something that will be discussed at length later in this chapter, however at the heart of these spontaneous shrines is the idea of an expression of mourning that is rooted in and seen through objects and materiality. Doss states that mourning and death have been continually linked to physical objects from 'urns, gravestones, cemetery plots, memento mori, photographs of the deceased (especially common in the late nineteenth century), mourning clothes,

mourning jewellery, and more' (Doss, 2010, p. 69). Objects give something tangible to the mourner to place their loss within, allowing them to engage with complex emotions in public and private.

These shrines are a way to express the events 'which numb our emotions and defy explanation' (Grider, 2001, p. 2). Therefore, they act as a place in which feelings can be expressed in a materialistic and indeed ritualistic way when words may fail. There is an emphasis on the ritual nature of these sites. They become a lived and expected part of the mourning world, heavily engrained in people's experiences of the mourning process.

Margret Gibson terms these 'melancholy objects'; these are 'objects of the dead – those spectral, melancholy objects mediating, and signifying, an absence' (2004, p. 285). These objects can be anything, as Gibson points out: 'Through death, the most mundane objects can rise in symbolic, emotional and mnemonic value sometimes outweighing all the other measures of value – particularly the economic' (2004, p. 292). As such, these objects become surrogates through which the mourning of the deceased can be enacted. The materiality of these shrines 'is widespread, sharing cultural and social practices that transcend religious, regional, racial, and ethnic differences' (Doss, 2010, p. 70).

The idea of the sacred sits uneasily in our ideas of popular culture and its discourse. Throughout popular cultural criticism there has been a growing trend to equate the ways in which we engage with popular culture, and especially fandom, in terms of the religious and the replacing of religion at the centre of western society and culture (Moberg, 2012; Partridge, 2015). This is inescapable when we consider these shrines to the dead. Throughout the literature on these spaces is the idea that these spaces act as both religious and sacred spaces, and as sites of pilgrimage whereupon mourners come to pay their respects in both presence and offerings. At first glance this seems to be a persuasive argument, but rather than taking the place of religion in our society, I would argue that these mourners have merely learnt the vernacular of these religious offerings, pilgrimages, and shrines, and utilised them to translate their own thoughts and feelings into something tangible and culturally understood.

These practices are learnt through the remediation of these sites. The death of Princess Diana looms large on these arguments, with the tributes paid outside of her home,

Buckingham palace, and her death site, etched into our memories through the 24-hour news cycles of the late 1990s (Kear & Steinberg, 1999). This media attention has shaped our understanding of how these practices can be enacted and engaged with. As mentioned previously, the spontaneous and ephemeral nature of these shrines leads to an emphasis on the idea of presence and how this is an integral part of the mourning process. Whether it is through presence at these shrines, the presentation of objects, or the social mourning of these spaces, we mourn the artist through all of these.

### **4.3. Authenticating George Michael's Persona(s)**

When considering George Michael as a persona we have to turn to the material on him within the press and more biographical works. Unlike the two other case studies in this thesis, Michael's music, legacy, and star text have been neglected by the academic community, but that does not mean that we cannot get a full picture of Michael as a persona. The next section aims to situate Michael's persona in the reception of his death within these sites of mourning. This will be done by first considering Michael's persona as a teen pop star, the fracturing of this wholesome image in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the reformation of his public persona as a straight cis sex symbol. I will then finally consider the scandal of his arrest in 1998, the subsequent 'Outside' music video, and how this was considered to have tainted his wider public persona. To frame these various personas this section will discuss four music videos. These will be 'Club Tropicana' (1983) by Wham!, and Michael's solo songs 'Faith' (1987), 'Freedom '90' (1990), and 'Outside' (1998). This will help us understand how Michael was considered in the public imagination and how this then informed his posthumous persona through the public's displays of mourning.

#### **4.3.1. *From Boy(band) to Man***

In one of the few peer-reviewed articles on Michael, Jaap Kooijman states that George Michael was 'the more serious half of the British fan boy duo Wham' (2004, p. 29), where

their hits and music videos ‘emphasized the carefree, fun-loving, even homoerotic character of the boyband’ (ibid). He played the sexless, yet sexy, boy band persona who was loved by teenage girls, their parents and grandparents in equal measure. In this section, I am going to consider the transition from early heartthrob to Michael’s search for a sense of legitimacy as an artist.

If we consider the persona Michael was emphasising in Wham! we see a reflection of that period in popular music history. Instead of the gritty urban presentation and the perceived ‘reality’ of the punk era of the late 1970s, this was pure pop escapism, which placed a new emphasis on fun with a bright and carefree feeling. By looking at the band’s video for their single ‘Club Tropicana’ (Wham!, 1983), we can highlight how Wham! positioned themselves in the public consciousness. This was first and foremost party music which could be danced to and engaged with in an easy 3-minute format. In the video there is an explicit rejection of normality, as the video evokes an escapism both in its use of visuals (the holiday setting) and its lyrical and instrumental content. This is underscored by the way in which Michael interacts with his Wham! co-singer Andrew Ridgeley. There is an emphasis on a homosocial relationship, where two friends prank each other, relax together, and stare at girls as they walk past (see Figure 4.3). Within all of this, George Michael is the carefree single man, as the audience can bask in what has been described as just ‘two heterosexual boys having fun’ (Smith, 2017, p. 150) by his biographer (Smith, 2017, p. 150).

Wham! were seen as light-hearted, intensely youthful, sometimes camp, but mostly underpinned with a heterosexual undertone throughout. In an early interview in 1983 with *Melody Maker* magazine by the journalist Carol Clerk, we can glimpse into the ways in which both George and Andrew presented themselves as Wham! the band. The article immediately nicknames the duo as ‘Gorgeous Georgie and Handy Andy’ (Clerk, 1983, n.p.), placing an emphasis on Michael’s looks and the boyband image heavily marketed to teenage girls. This heterosexual narrative of the young heartthrob persona continues in the article as Clerk states that:

The current Club Fantastic tour is creating pubescent mayhem round the country, consolidating the popularity of Wham! as recording stars. At Liverpool, an unseated gig, there were scenes of wild teenage frenzy and unbridled impulse. Members of

the crew later claimed that 24 cases of fainting and one broken collar bone were on record. (Clerk, 1983, n.p.).

This construction follows a well-worn path in popular music discourse. The young men are objectified and used to appeal to teenage girls as a marketing strategy promoted by both the band and their management. This is coupled with the emphasis they placed on being friends from school, and they would continually play up to this fact and highlight their early bonds. The persona here is reinforced by the relatability and approachability of the duo as they position themselves as both faraway and exotic sex symbols, but also as the boys next door.

We see from the interview with *Melody Maker* that both Michael and Ridgeley were conscious of how this presentation of persona was linked with authenticity and affect, stating that their use of 'imagery' was in the name of 'entertainment and escapism' (Clerk, 1983, n.p.). rather than anything deeper. They continue this by tackling the critics who they perceived to be attacking their authenticity, stating:

George: 'The thing is that we don't look like we take ourselves seriously. We go so over the top that people see us for what we really are – entertainers.'

Andrew: 'We just act at being pop stars for one and a half hours, and I don't see how people could take it seriously' (Clerk, 1983, n.p.).

These quotes are illuminating in the way they show the duo's approach to the construction of fame and being famous. They like to be famous; they like to be marketed and are conscious of it. However, there is also an awareness of personas and the ways in which they are constructed within this, which would set up Michael for the ways in which he dealt with personas for the rest of his career. He presented himself as a product of artifice from the beginning. We can infer where Michael's persona sits within this, especially in the ways he positions himself unapologetically as a pop star whilst stating that he wanted this all along. This unabashed and unashamed way he embraced stardom would form a narrative which would underpin his personas all the way up until his death.

If we consider George Michael's mid 1980s persona through Allan Moore's ideas of authenticity, he sits within a second person authenticity, or as Moore calls it, 'the

authenticity of experience' (Moore, 2002, p. 220). Michael's Wham! persona is reflective of the experience of a young heterosexual man in the 1980s. He was able to position his persona as one of blank canvas, and he was able to transmit into the public consciousness a reflection of the escapism, the excess, and decadence of the mid-1980s economic and technological boom. Authenticity is a complicated concept in this regard, as Michael deliberately positioned his persona not in terms of an artistic stance but a popular one. Here, authenticity is about entertainment; who cares where you come from or what your real name is if you are having a good time and the audience is enjoying themselves? Therefore, George Michael's early persona was forged by these displays where he was engrained into the public consciousness as an entertainer, the blank canvas that could be enjoyed by all.

Sexuality had always been at the forefront of Wham!'s image, however, they trod the industry line of the day, never announcing anything whilst playing towards the common denominator of heterosexuality. Michael himself reinforced how the sexual ambiguity of the artists before them had been their strength; as Smith points out in his biography 'he liked the ambiguity, claiming that sort of thing had done no harm to the careers of David Bowie and Mick Jagger' (Smith, 2017, p.150). However, within the earlier interviews with the press, Michael and Ridgeley's personas were heavily skewed towards the heterosexual teenage market. This would underpin his persona construction throughout his career and even come back to haunt him.

When Wham! broke up in 1986 Michael was already a household name and poised to take his solo career to different heights. The breakup allowed Michael to reinvent himself outside of the fun pop duo dynamic. The release of his first solo album *Faith* in 1987 moved Michael's persona from the 'boyish fun' of Wham! into 'explicit heterosexual seriousness' (Kooijman, 2004, p.29) imagery. The 'Faith leather boy,' (Schultheis, 2020, p. 134) was an overly 'macho image designed to suppress his feminine side' (*ibid*) and reinforce his heterosexual credentials. The evolution of Michael's persona from boyband pinup to a confident and heterosexually explicit pop star is seen through his visual and lyrical representation in the video for the song 'Faith' (Michael, 1987). This video is structured around the symbolism of 'the softness of the faded blue jeans, earrings and jacket [which] are contraposed with the phallic imagery of a jukebox, cowboy boots and guitar' (Drukman,

1995, 92), seen in Figure 4.4. Here, Michael is deliberately invoking the rock and roll singers of the mid to late 1950s with his leather jacket, old-fashioned guitar, and use of a jukebox. He is embracing the heterosexual presentation of Elvis Presley on the Ed Sullivan show by repackaging himself as a grown up and sexualised man. This is underpinned by the beginning of the video that plays his controversial, and rumoured to be banned, song 'I Want Your Sex', which reinforces Michael as a heterosexual man, evolving from the boy the public saw in Wham!

This evolution continued in the David Fincher directed 'legs-and-lingerie draped video' (Dessau, 1989, p. 209) for his song 'Freedom '90' (Michael, 1990). George Michael's persona, just like Bowie's, was based around a complex mixture of audio, journalistic, and visual representations within his music videos. As such, from the late 80's and early 90's, Michael's videos reinforced a persona of straight man, one that was 'serving the appetite of young women for sexual release through voyeurism' (Schultheis, 2020, p. 135). We can see something else in this video for 'Freedom '90': an evolution of persona in a more complex way. The imagery of the burning leather jacket of the Faith video, the exploding guitar, and the jukebox (seen in Figure 4.5), show how Michael was determined to put his younger persona behind him.

Through the inclusion of the supermodels, both men and women, Michael was pivoting further towards a sexualised image. It also showcases the slow remaking that Michael was pursuing in this period, visualised through the obvious symbolism of the destruction of his Faith outfit. This provided a release from his previous personas, showcasing his movement into a different, more serious realm, all the while maintaining a sexually ambiguous popstar image. The authenticity of George Michael's persona at this point lays in its affect and the emotions this stirred within his fanbase. It is clear from media representation and discourses at the time that Michael was deliberately evoking a 'sexual ambiguity' (Hadleigh, 1991, 188) that was left vague and unconfirmed as a commercial and personal decision. This sexual ambiguity 'continued to be an essential part of George Michael's persona' (Kooijman, 2004, p.30), reinforced through his musical output, videos, and media interviews. The authenticity of affect lies in this ambiguity. Just as with Bowie in Chapter 2, Michael was a blank canvas that offered and welcomed the 'gaze' (Drukman, 1995. 92) of both men and women by neither confirming nor denying where his authentic passions were.

Through these three videos and three case studies of persona, we can view George Michael clearly as a media object in the context of the time period. His persona was neither gay nor straight, offering the viewer and listener a highly sexualised image that welcomed the gaze of multiple genders and sexualities. Just like Wham!'s persona can be considered as a representation of second person authenticity, so can Michael's subsequent personas. Although he was guarded about his own personal life, the persona he was invoking in the media representations of himself were linked to the authenticity of affect. The highly sexualised images and the lyrics which emphasised promiscuity and hedonism, represented an authenticity of experience for the listener that either reflected a personal experience within themselves, or one which they would hope to experience. Therefore, although Michael's personas at this time were fatuous with their reference to sex, fame, and knowingly playing towards the pop music audience, there still exists within this a form of authenticity which was consumed by the listener. However, when this representation and persona got too real, George Michael's persona would be changed forever.

#### **4.3.2. *Outside (the Closet)***

The representation of George Michael's persona was fractured when on the 7<sup>th</sup> April 1998 he was arrested for a 'lewd act' in the public toilet of a park in Los Angeles (McAllister, 1998). In this section, I am going to consider how this act, his arrest, and subsequent comeback shaped and rewrote his personas up until his death. This will be done by considering the tabloid press coverage of his arrest and Michael's own response in the music video for his song 'Outside.' This shift in persona and the coverage of this event shaped Michael's persona in the latter half of his career, and by discussing this through Erving Goffman's concept of 'spoiled identity' (1963), it will be possible to consider how this shaped engagement with his death.

Firstly, to see how the event was initially represented in wider popular culture, I am going to consider how the tabloid newspapers of the time reported it. Arguably the 1980s and 1990s were when the tabloidization of British popular culture established itself as one of the dominant forms of political, social, and cultural taste-making. In her book *Journalism and*

*Celebrity*, Bethany Usher states that the link between the tabloids and wider cultural discussions by journalists often co-created the star and their persona (2020). Journalism, and especially the tabloids, became ‘means by which the hyper-reality of stardom could eclipse reality’ (Usher, 2020, p. 108). This established itself through the tabloidism of Britain’s cultural and political discourse, and the tabloid format became the ‘fame-maker, confidant, mentor, liberator, judge, jury, and executioner’ (p. 112). Politicians, public figures, and celebrities cultivated their star image with the tabloids in mind, afraid of their power to destroy.

This tabloidisation of society is the environment into which George Michael became famous. Through the Wham! years both Michael and Ridgeley cultivated their star image to express themselves as fun loving and sexually free ‘fun boys,’ with Michael utilising the tabloids and his own presentation to break free, to express himself in a heavily sexualised image. As discussed in Chapter 2, a musician’s persona is given form by a mixture of the press, fans, and the artist projects (Auslander, 2006). It stands to reason that this persona construction can both construct the positive and indeed the negative elements of a star’s image. It is this side which we will consider next.

George Michael had kept his sexual identity guarded up until the incident in Los Angeles, preferring to either not answer the question or to state he was bisexual. The incident itself was reported in the British tabloid *The Daily Mirror* with the headline ‘Three sleazy minutes that brought an idol’s world crashing down; GEORGE MICHAEL’S SEX SHAME’ (Dunn, 1998). The tone of sensationalism continued into the main body of the reporting with the paper particularly emphasizing that the ‘area is popular with families and residents had complained about perverts in the park’ (ibid) This tone underpinned a sense that the act George Michael was caught trying to do, hooking up with another man, was shameful and disgusting. There is thinly veiled euphemistic language used in the piece, with an emphasis on the ‘shamed singer...’ (ibid), referencing that Michael was caught by four officers who ‘regularly patrol for perverts’ (ibid) in the park. In Usher’s characterising of the tabloids of the time, Michael had certainly been found guilty by the judge, jury, and executioner of the newspaper, being found to have breached the societal norms expected of him as a public figure. The piece ends by stating that ‘Los Angeles has long been a gay mecca for stars desperate to hide their true inclinations’ (Dunn, 1998, n.p.). This ending reinforced that

Michael was ashamed of who he was and casts him as an outsider living a lie on the fringes of society. This idea would come to underpin how people thought of and mourned Michael in the latter part of his life.

George Michael's response to being caught is seen as a textbook example of how to deal with negative press. Although in interviews he expressed remorse at being 'found out' this way, through the song and the accompanying video 'Outside' (Michael, 1998) Michael was able to come out ahead of the story and try and own the narrative of his coming out. This forced coming out led Michael to confess that he felt 'stupid and reckless and weak for having allowed my sexuality to be exposed this way' (Wapshott & Wapshott, 1999, p. 303). In the video for the song 'Outside', however, we see a confident and cocky George Michael openly mocking the police force who arrested him and pointing out that what he did was a natural act, seen in Figure 4.6. This was a clear change in persona, whether forced or otherwise, resulting in what Kooijman calls his 'transformation into a 1970s disco clone, fitting the stereotype of the hedonistic, sexually promiscuous gay man' (2004, p. 31). With this act he was able to face the shame and perversion through the song and the imagery of the video. Although his outing was out of his control, he used this video 'to reposition himself as an 'out' star and to control the damage that the arrest may have caused to his career.' (Kooijman, 2004, p. 37)

However, although Michael had clearly come through the event with some level of artistic and personal integrity, he was held in contempt by the court of public opinion. This manifested itself in the way his fans saw him. As Scultheis points out, 'as a performer, he had been serving the appetite of young women for sexual release through voyeurism. But he was conducting this performance under false pretences' (2020, p. 135). The previous persona of Michael we saw in the first half of his career was in direct contradiction to the one being presented from 1998 onwards. These contradictory personas exist within our understanding of Michael as an artist now, with the 'the star-text that incorporates George Michael's forcing coming out as a gay man [existing] within his star-image of seriousness and sexual ambiguity' (Kooijman, 2004, p. 37).

Michael's coming out did not exist in a vacuum and the ways in which he was depicted in the tabloid press has attached itself in the form of stigma to his persona, even posthumously. There is something telling in Kooijman's description of the 'Outside' music

video when he describes the performance as one ‘fitting the stereotype of the hedonistic, sexually promiscuous gay man’ (2004, p. 31). This is further underscored by Michael himself as he repeatedly claimed in interviews to regret having been in that situation in the first place (Schultheis, 2020). This positioned Michael’s actions within the outer fringes of what was deemed to be acceptable in the society at the time by engaging with ‘actions [which] do not fit within heteronormative culture’ (Kooijman, 2004, p. 36). The emphasis on the hedonistic style of Michael’s transgressions gave rise to the narrative that exists in the definition of the ‘bad gay’ (Casey, 2007), who is described as sitting outside of the dominant heteronormative behaviours.

Erving Goffman, in his work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963) uses the term ‘spoiled identity’ to characterise a persona that causes the person to be exposed to stigma in their day to day lives, whether that is through race, gender, sexuality, or behaviour. With the concept of the spoiled identity, the ‘bad gay’ persona of Michael as a hedonistic homosexual who exists outside western social norms, manifested itself into a spoiled identity which underpinned subsequent discourses around him. We can see this initially with the reports of the incident in the tabloid newspapers who reiterated the act as shameful, perverted, and illegal. However, we can trace this identity throughout his life and even up to the point of his death. If we turn again to the article by Schultheis, although a deeply flawed and misjudged piece, we can see how the spoiled identity has been pinned onto Michael after his death, with her stating that ‘the days that followed [his death], the narrative took shape: drink, drugs, rehab, and relapse. Sad but predictable’ (2020, p. 127). In this characterisation, Michael is seen as a deeply flawed, almost lost persona, who was a clichéd hedonistic homosexual who eventually paid the price of his own spoiled identity.

Mark Casey (2007) gives form to this idea by stating that the homosexual image that sits within heteronormative concepts is the one of ‘non-threatening lesbian and gay men’ (2007, p. 127). The ability for these lesbians and gay men to access communal spaces and exist within society is ‘contingent’ on adhering to a certain set of behaviours, ‘meaning that aspects of Queer culture are rendered invisible and are denied access to the same public space’ (Bell & Binnie, 2004, p. 1811). We can see by the reception to George Michael’s shrine by the community of Highgate and the ways in which he was discussed within the tabloid sphere, that the behaviours of being caught in the public toilet marked Michael out

as one of the queer unwanted. Casey links the queer unwanted back into the changing physical geography of the toilet space, as society is continually engaged in the 'de-sexualising of gayness' by 'designing the bad gay out of the cityscape' (Casey, 2007, p. 128 – 129) through the criminalisation of Michael and others who use these spaces. As such, Michael has been instilled with the spoiled identity that is ascribed to these acts and linked to the bad gay stereotype that comes along with this. The act of being caught in the toilet is still linked to the persona of Michael in death, as Figure 4.7 shows with fans posing outside of the toilet in question in their mourning posts, and also in the renaming of this space on Google as 'George Michael Memorial Restroom.'

Death did not stop Michael being discussed in terms that stigmatised his life choices. Jacque Foltyn brings the concept of the spoiled identity onto the corpse of the celebrity. She states that there is a fascination with the death of the celebrity that:

focuses on flaws, the uncovering of evidence of weight gain, plastic surgery and illness, and after death, for some, a fascination with the corpse...[this] can alter the carefully constructed celebrity persona, revealing once private, embarrassing information or secrets. (Foltyn, 2016, p. 248).

Evidently, with this quote, death does not completely erase the spoiled identity from the persona of the celebrity, instead death may bring with it more accusations or secrets, whilst altering how the celebrity was perceived pre-death. The stigma of George Michael as a homosexual male who likes to perform sex acts in public did not leave with his death, rather it was still attached to his posthumous persona. This highlights that even though Michael did indeed embrace his life as a gay man, whether that was through the campness of the 'Outside' or through interviews and appearances, he could never quite run away from the stigma of being caught and with this the concept of the spoiled identity continued to be reinforced even after his death.

#### 4.4. Mourning and Evocative Objects

As we can see from the previous section, George Michael's persona went through several incarnations throughout his life. With Michael's death in 2016, there was no dominant persona that manifested itself within the public consciousness. As a result, Michael's spoiled identity existed alongside his previous personas and his posthumous identity became a site of blurred identities and different pasts. In this next section I am going to consider how the site of mourning and the objects displayed there are interacted with. I will then consider the meanings behind the different types of objects on display and how they were used to mourn Michael. Objects in these sites are vessels through which mourners can express both their own and George Michael's identity. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, objects are an important part of the sites where memorials are based. They link the mourner to both the deceased and the site which they represent, manifesting something tangible through which to express their mourning. In this next section I will discuss how these objects can be seen as evocative and how they can be identified as a conduit through which fans can express their mourning.

When we first look at the site of the shrine for George Michael in Highgate, we are immediately struck by the sheer volume of tributes crammed into the small square opposite his home, as seen in Figure 4.1. As discussed previously in this chapter, Grider (2001, p.3) states there needs to be certain conditions met for the site to be a constructive and successful shrine. The first of these is location. The sites of Michael's shrines were split into two, with one appearing at his death site in Oxfordshire and one at his long-term residence in Highgate, London. Due to the geographical location of the Highgate home (it had a patch of ground opposite the site which belonged to George Michael) and its access via the London transport network, this site became more popular for the congregation of mourners and objects. As seen in the photographs of this site, Grider's assertion that there needs to be a space, which has a 'prominent vertical surface, such as a fence or a wall, on which arrangements of memorabilia can be displayed' (Grider, 2001, p.3), applies directly to the Highgate home. With this location mourners had the connection to Michael and his biography, the physical space in which to enact the shrine, and the access to this site through public right of way and transport links.

The second condition Grider points to is the absence of a grave or physical space where the body may be laid to rest. There was confusion surrounding Michael's death which did not just affect the ways in which his spoiled identity was presented and engaged with, it also deprived the mourners of both a place of resting for Michael and access to his body. The coroner held Michael's body for six months in order to fully determine his cause of death, leaving people to speculate and mourn him without an explanation. This confusion and subsequent delay led the mourners to seek out spaces like Michael's Highgate home to engage with a form of closure by being present in a space closely associated with Michael and his biography. This space therefore acts as a one-stop shop for George Michael's mourning. By engaging with the site and with other mourners, people were able to negotiate, and even negate the effects of the absence of a body and instead focus their mourning energy on this site for both themselves and others.

The final aspect Grider speaks of is that of ephemerality. With Michael's shrine, this was a permanent issue until the family finally relented to the local communities' calls to demolish and pack down the shrine 18 months after his death. This ephemerality is mirrored in the transient nature of both the mourners to these sites and the more culturally understood objects of mourning they left at these shrines. For instance, the use of flowers at these sites is very common but they naturally have a short life and wilt from the moment they are placed at the shrines. Mourners themselves are ephemeral, with many of the posts and photographs of the site appearing in the immediate aftermath of Michael's death. The ephemeral nature of these shrines imbues the immediate engagement with them at the beginning of the mourning process with added significance. Within this initial time period the mourner extends their presence in the site through the leaving of objects.

There is a tension here in the ephemerality of these shrines and how they are remediated by these mourners online. We have to think of these as being in a grey area between being ephemeral and permanent, with the mourner using the photograph and objects to showcase their appearance at these shrines but also remediating their presence on their social media feeds. The archival nature of the Internet, as discussed at length in the introduction of this thesis, allows us to see that there will be a record of this photograph as long as the user has a profile on these sites. However, the constant flow of information and the platform vernacular of Instagram also goes against the idea that even the photographs

of these sites are a permanent element within the lives of these mourners. Eventually they will upload more photos, achieve new likes, and these photographs will be further and further down their Instagram grid. Here we can see a mirroring of the objects within the sites of mourning. These will also eventually decay and be removed; as such, the objects, the shrine, and the remediation all sit at this intersection between ephemerality and permeance. We see both the sites and sights of mourning here. They are at once available as permanent memories through the object of the photograph, but they are also ephemeral in the objects left behind (as they get thrown away) and the flow of information on the mourner's social media feeds.

#### **4.5. Object Types, Kitsch, and the Highgate Shrine**

When first looking at the objects at the Highgate shrine, we can see three distinct, yet interlocking types presented in this space. These are not mutually exclusive object categories; a mourner could potentially place objects from across these different categories without consciously realising. However, for the purposes of trying to understand the objects left at this shrine it is useful to highlight their differences. I have characterised these three object groups as:

1. 'Traditional' Objects of Mourning
2. Objects Specific to the Artist
3. Objects Specific to the Mourner

The traditional objects of mourning are the expressions which have deep roots in western collective memory as having an association with the mourning period. These include flowers, candles, and in some cases photographs of the deceased. All three are present at George Michael's shrine in Figure 4.8.

I am not going to dedicate too much space in this thesis deconstructing how traditional forms of mourning are considered in these spaces, but as we can see with the two photos in Figure 4.9, this was the same at the sites present after the death of both David Bowie and Leonard Cohen. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the parasocial mourning that

has developed in the 21st century utilises the tropes of traditional mourning. These learned shorthand practices allow mourners to attend the site without thinking too deeply about what they want to put at the shrine. As a result, these culturally understood expressions of mourning allow users to become part of the mourning shrine but in a more united way, giving relatable form to the shrine as a piece of mourning expression.

Mourners depositing flowers or candles are drawing upon years of celebrity memorials, which in turn drew on hundreds of years of culturally understood objects of mourning (Doss, 2010; Kear & Steinberg, 1999). Within Michael's shrine, there are the walls of flowers which have been an expression of mourning as far back as Roman times, although resurrected again in Western Culture in the Victorian era, and the candles which symbolise the secular reimaging of the old practice of lighting a candle in church. These objects are no less poignant than the ones which hold deeply personal significance. They play a vital role as a universally understood sign of mourning and act as an indication that this site is now a shrine.

The second type of object at these sites is the one that is associated with mourning of the celebrity directly. This is the second most common expression of mourning in the site at Highgate. We can see this enacted in Figure 4.10 with the 'Choose Life' t-shirt and the number of different artistic impressions of George Michael from various stages of his career. This category of object includes artist images, art (hand drawn pictures of George Michael, album covers, and lyrics), Wham! And Michael memorabilia, and flags of the UK, Greece, and Cyprus, where Michael's family is from. These are what mourners deemed to be representative of what Michael meant to them and the persona most associated with their fandom. These objects signify what the audience sees in the artist, they are more personalised than the traditional objects of mourning and can be seen to represent what the mourners see as George Michael's 'objects', the things that represent him, his character, and his media persona in death.

The third type of object within this site are the ones which are specific to the mourner. This is perhaps the most interesting and unique of the three of these object types. The objects specific to the mourner visible here are the Spanish flag, personalised notes, and photographs which do not include George Michael. In many ways these objects are similar to the other two categories as they maintain a connection to the artist in the posthumous

moment. However, contrary to the other two, these objects may seem out of place to casual onlookers and observers of these shrines. For instance, let us consider the Spanish flag Figure 4.11. This presumably highlights a memory that a fan personally had of Michael and illustrates the link between the fan and the artist through this memory. By leaving the flag here, the mourner is using their own biography to mourn Michael. These objects are the most powerful expression of what Gibson termed the melancholy object. As the artist dies, mundane objects have been imbued with the significance of that loss. Objects which may have held a memory, such as what you were wearing when you found out they died, are embedded with the added significance of mourning. These objects are not reflections of George Michael in the traditional sense, but rather a piece of the mourner that has been left behind to establish and continue the connection with the artist.

Erika Doss in her dissection of memorial cultures, posited that objects at these sites are polarizing. She stated that they are 'often scorned for their obsessive materiality and manic displays of mourning' (Doss, 2010, p. 68). Doss then goes on to state that the objects in these spaces can be 'deemed "too much" and even fetishistic; their overwrought sensibilities seemingly strain boundaries between good taste and vulgarity' (p. 68). This attitude is enacted throughout the Highgate memorial site by the surrounding community. In a piece discussing the removal of the objects from these sites at the request of George Michael's family, British newspaper the *Evening Standard* talked to multiple neighbours in the surrounding area. Although the consensus was that Michael was well liked in the area, these objects and the shrine had 'caused friction with some residents' (Grafton-Green, 2018, n.p.), with one unnamed contributor stating that they 'think it is hideous. It is very tacky, it is grotesque, and it has been there since the day he died' (*ibid*). We can infer from these quotes that the objects at these shrines were considered to be what Doss would term as 'too much' and as illustrated in photos below, these sentiments eventually led to the removal of these objects and the destruction of the shrine.

There is a tension in the ways in which Michael's shrine was considered compared to Bowie's, with the objects around Bowie's site celebrated by the memorial being made permanent (Gritsch, 2019). With the use of the word 'tacky', there is a value judgment being bestowed onto the objects, mourners, and the site of George Michael's shrine. There is an aesthetic element to this judgment as neighbours were concerned not about the mourning

process but rather the look of their up-market area. This brings into question how these objects can be considered in these spaces as objects of taste. Doss's evaluation of these objects as being seen as tacky and vulgar position them into the realm of kitsch.

The term kitsch came into common usage within the art dealer community of Munich in the 1860s to 'designate "cheap artistic stuff"' (Calinescu, 1987, p. 234). This was further expanded upon by Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno through their critiques of throwaway and mass marketed popular culture (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002), and was developed to describe the products which were of, and a manifestation of, the mass industrialisation of the 20th century. It is natural that the definition of kitsch is culturally and historically contingent. To bring this back to the object types discussed above, we can see levels of kitsch running through each of the different object types. For instance, the traditional objects of mourning became a shorthand through which the shrine developed. Drawing upon culturally understood ideas of what should go on these shrine sites, through decades of celebrity death coverage, mourners were able to grapple with their mourning. Through the lens of kitsch this would be characterised as a certain type of 'theatrical emotionalism and affectation of kitsch' (Rugg, 2002, n.p.) which is embodied into the idea of kitsch as a concept and how it is perceived in the wider cultural context of both ideas and aesthetics. These definitions place emphasis on the inherent artificiality in the way objects 'tend to mimic the effects produced by real sensory experiences presenting highly charged imagery, language, or music that triggers an automatic, and therefore unreflective, emotional reaction' (Kulka, 1996, p. 26).

If we link this back into the objects at the shrine, we can see that the imbuing of mourning within the object instils within them a deliberate level of affect. The placing of it at the shrine may evoke this affect and in turn is seen as bringing a private emotion into the public domain. The uncanny similarity of the shrine to a grave site could seem distracting and in bad taste as somebody is airing their mourning in public. It is within the uses of the term 'tacky' and Doss' definition that these sites can seem 'too much,' revealing the inherent kitschiness of the objects at these shrines. The constant sight of a place of mourning brings death into the public consciousness that has largely been removed, as Tony Walter points out (2015), to sterile rooms in hospitals out of sight. This foregrounding of the shrine in a

public place airs the mourning emotion for all to see, which in turn is instilled in all the objects presented at this site.

When we consider the Michael shrine and some of the objects left there as kitsch, it allows us to see how affective objects are used within the mourning process. Clement Greenberg argues that one of the pre-conditions of a kitsch item is its 'availability close at hand' where it takes on 'a fully formed cultural tradition, whose discoveries, acquisitions and perfected self-consciousness [it] can take advantage of for its own ends' (Greenberg, 1939, p. 40). This is coupled with the affective dimension of kitsch as the objects at the shrine are part of the everydayness that kitsch inhabits. However, I would argue that instead of representing a culture or an affect through the object itself in this context, it is the space of the shrine itself which imbues the object with its affectiveness and its kitschiness. By understanding that the objects at the shrine of Michael can be seen as kitsch, we can begin to make sense of how people in the community reacted against them. There is the idea that these objects are infused with a falsity of sentimentality that sits outside of a seemingly polite way to mourn. By looking through the lens of kitsch, we can see how people sitting outside of the mourning process looked upon these objects of mourning, believing them artificially affective, mass-produced, and devoid of meaning.

It stands to reason when we consider these definitions that the objects at these shrines can be termed kitsch, both in their presentation and reception. They are indeed steeped with a sentimentality, whether that is through their location, or through their relationship to the mourner. The negative ways in which these objects are considered is heavily influenced by the reception of George Michael as a person and the spoiled identity which attached to Michael's persona. This is clearer when we consider how Bowie's spontaneous shrine in Brixton was considered in the aftermath of his death. Contrary to the ways in which Michael's shrine was considered in the community, Bowie's was instead venerated, with the local council making the shrine permanent and archiving the non-perishables left at the site. This reaction could not have been more different to the ways in which Michael's community engaged with the site of his mourning, which existed on land owned by Michael and his subsequent inheritors. As we can see from the image, there is a distinct lack of kitsch style objects in the presentation at Bowie's shrine. Rather, there is a heavy reliance on what I have termed traditional objects of mourning, such as flowers and cards carrying messages.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the heavy reliance of kitsch objects is directly linked to Michael's legacy and the ways in which, just as Michael was considered to be in poor taste in life, so the non-traditional objects left at his shrine signalled the continuation of this in death.

This separation of legacies is brought into stark contrast when we consider the objects visible within Figure 4.12. I think there is an element of taste within this, as the printed element of the sign seems very kitsch and homemade. There is a reference to 'heal the pain', which links back to Michael's spoiled identity and the fans reclaiming of that narrative. There appears to be a need to let Michael know 'he was loved'; they feel like, as fans, they are providing a service to him in his death. They are letting the world know, and maybe even Michael himself, that they are there for him and he doesn't need to feel ashamed of who he was. This is a continuation of the spoiled persona and how this manifested in the way he was considered after his death. Michael is seen as a tragic figure, almost a victim, as his fans try and reclaim both their personal memories of him and his memory in the wider culture.

While considering the definitions of kitsch placed forth here, we can see the site of the shrine for George Michael parallels these definitions. As voiced by the neighbours in the community, they were considered in poor taste and indeed 'tacky.' They also follow kitsch's definition of being both mass-produced, as seen in the mass-produced photo-frames, flags, and balloons on display, but also, we see a linkage to the semblance of emotion. If we consider the objects in these sites as kitsch, we are shown they are objects which infer emotion, that present a predetermined level of emotional instability. Kitsch is used in the work of most art historians to discredit certain art forms and objects, and by extension, the collector of the art (in kitsch's example it was the lower middle classes). However, if we take this example of the display of overt and high emotion, even sentimentality, it is clear that the kitsch in these sites, and maybe even kitsch in general, can be described as evocative. We can characterise the objects within these spaces as having an overt artificiality of emotion that bleeds into their performance as an evocative object.

These kitsch objects represent not just an invasion of death upon the residents of Highgate's community but also the highlighting of the spoiled persona that Michael represented to people other than his fans. By discussing the objects through the lens of kitsch we can see

that they are manifestations of both the mourning of the fan but also of Michael's identity of sitting outside of polite society. It would do a disservice to the mourners at these sites to have their actions labelled in the critical way that kitsch is generally regarded in the art world and by various Highgate residents. Rather, I want to link this back to the positive aspects of discussing these objects as kitsch. As such, I am going to pivot into how these objects acted as 'evocative objects' that represented the ways in which mourners wanted to remember George Michael.

#### **4.6. Evocative Objects and the Mourner**

The previous section allowed us to consider how the objects at the shrine of George Michael can, and indeed were, seen by the wider culture and the immediate community where they were presented. However, the use of kitsch and the ways in which these objects were discussed by the neighbours of Michael, do not account for the ways in which his mourners used these objects to represent their loss. As discussed above, the term kitsch allowed us to consider how the objects at the shrine of Michael were seen in a critical light, placing the affective dimension of the objects into a critical, and indeed even cynical light, by the Highgate community. This reflected Michael's spoiled identity. There was a hangover from the ways in which he was considered to be in bad taste in life, bleeding into the ways in which his fans chose to mourn him. This is seen starkly in the comparison between how the shrine was seen in overall cultural discourse compared to Bowie's Brixton one. In this section I am going to discuss how the shrine and the objects within them can be seen as evocative objects that are imbued with significance on both the personal and the collective level. This will then be discussed through the ways in which learnt behaviours have enabled the mourning of Michael within these spaces and what these objects can tell us about the mourner.

Using the term kitsch allows us to see how these objects were seen in a critical light within the Highgate community, however, it fails to highlight the very real sentimentality felt by the mourners who placed them there. Earlier in this chapter I introduced the idea of the melancholy object through Gibson's work on shrines. These 'objects of the dead' act as a

way of 'signifying an absence' (Gibson, 2004, p. 285). Gibson places these objects through Winnicott's idea of the 'transitional object' (1971) where objects have the 'protective powers [of] warding off danger and offering comfort' (Gibson, 2004, p. 288). These transitional objects materialise through our inherent need to 'fill in the psychic experience of this gap or spacing' (288) that occurs with traumatic events. This allows us to see how objects can be instilled with a psychic function, through which they are injected with a comforting aspect established throughout the mourning process. Although the objects themselves signify an absence, by being present they can reflect a sense of comfort for the mourner.

Gibson's melancholy objects allow us to consider how the materiality of the shrine is an important part of the mourning process. By looking at the objects at Michael's shrine we can see that although he is not present 'the melancholy object is the affective remainder or residual trace of sadness and longing in non-forgetting' (Gibson, 2004, p.289). To put this a simpler way, the objects at these shrines act as a residual reminder of the deceased, through which mourners can engage with the object which brings into remembering loss. However, this gets harder when we consider the one-sided parasocial relationship of the fan and artist. Instead, we must think about the object here as being imbued with the fandom represented by the mourner rather than representing the artist. We can clearly see that the objects that are both traditional objects of mourning and ones closely related to the artist, flowers and photographs for instance, can be conceived and understood to be melancholy objects. However, Gibson's work fails to consider the more abstract objects we see at the shrine of Michael, where objects that seem to have no link to the artist are placed by the mourner. Therefore, it stands to reason that the concept of the melancholy object is too narrow and divided to consider all the objects displayed at the shrine.

If we look at Christopher Bollas' work on the evocative object, we can see that the limits of the melancholy object can be extended by thinking of them as evocative objects. Bollas describes that for him the term 'evocative objects' is used 'to denote external objects that evoke inner states of mind' (2008, p. 86). Here the evocative objects are the external manifestation of the inner mind, for instance an object such as the Spanish flag left at the shrine of George Michael can be seen not as an expression of mourning for Michael directly, but a manifestation of an evocative object from the mourner. Sherry Turkle in her edited

collection *Evocative Objects* (2007) takes this further by linking the term evocative objects to the real-world objects we use to think with. For instance, the many objects in the collection include: a cello, a keyboard, ballet slippers, a bracelet, a vacuum cleaner, alongside many others. Each one of these objects is permeated with different emotions, whether that is a lost relative, a period of their life, or a connection with a loved one. Within all these objects however, there exists a sense of loss, whether that is the loss of a loved one through death or separation or something more abstract like the loss of a childhood. We cannot for certain state that all evocative objects are instilled with mourning, but all mourning objects can be considered evocative.

Within these definitions anything can be deemed an evocative object, unlike mourning objects that are linked to the deceased. The evocative object takes its power and application from the inner thoughts of the object consumer. These objects, according to Bollas, co-exist within an 'evocative object world' (2008) where objects are linked into our society through their 'object biography' (Kopytoff, 1986). These object biographies sit 'alongside that of a person' (Turkle, 2007, p. 315), where we see that the object can shadow the life and as such come to reflect them in the posthumous moments. These all sit within what Bollas terms our 'islands of experience' (**citation**) where the 'experience potential' of each object provides 'textures of self-experience' (Bollas, 2008, p. 87 – 89). The selection of objects which we imbue with meaning offers a 'means of expression' (*ibid*, p.89) through which we can understand something of the inner self of the object giver. Ultimately, the choice of objects at the shrine of George Michael allows us to see what the mourner invested and made into an evocative object, giving us an insight into how they wanted to both remember Michael and seen to be remembering.

#### 4.7. Mourning and the Unthought Known

Christopher Bollas' work tells us that anything can be an evocative object and we exist in an evocative object world. Through his work Bollas links these objects through what he terms the 'unthought known,' which Bollas links to the child's relationship with the objects around them. Here 'the object can cast its shadow without a child being able to process this

relation' (Bollas, 1987, p. XV). Although Bollas centres this on the child and mother, or parent, relationship, it can also come from the wider society as well. The mourner here is drawing upon learned practices to expand upon and work with the expressions of mourning. For instance, the use of the flowers and the objects on these sites are a learned experience that manifests itself into the unthought known, where mourners have been instilled with the cultural practice of leaving objects within these sites and how these objects are then imbued with a sense of purpose and identity. However, this may not be a conscious act; rather, mourners almost do this without thinking through why or how they are doing it.

Bollas points out that 'the patient knows the object setting through which he developed, and it is a part of him, but it has yet had to be thought.' (1987, p. 154). If we consider the evocative objects of the shrine through this idea, we can see that the learnt practices of the three object classes discussed above are instilled into the mourner from the culture which surrounds them. They might not know why they placed flowers at this site, however, due to the learnt behaviours they go along with the act because they feel like they need to do something. Within this unthought known we can begin to see where the more unique evocative objects at the shrine of Michael came from, or indeed why the mourner thought they were appropriate to put there. Doss and Gibson in their work on shrines and objects, reinforce that the object being left behind at these shrines is an extension of the mourner. Therefore, by thinking of them as evocative objects instilled with the inner meanings of the mourner and by their presence, we can view these shrines as evocative object worlds within their own right, as traditional forms of mourning objects encounter the more abstract notion of the wider evocative object world.

When we consider Figure 4.12, we see that there is a highly homemade appeal to the objects at the George Michael shrine. We can link this back to the elements of taste discussed in the above section which have plagued Michael since the 1990s. We see a homemade printed sheet with hastily compiled photographs and various household objects that can be considered to be loosely linked to Michael. This tells us two things, that the mourner was in haste and that they used the objects found around themselves to form their tribute for Michael. The evocative objects that are compiled into this space only become evocative because they are here. For instance, the inclusion of the multiple lanterns and the picture frame, clearly show the reliance on what we can term as found objects, meaning

objects around the mourner that can be used in the situation of the shrine. These objects may not have been evocative before, however, by being presented in the space of the shrine they can be seen as being instilled with the affectiveness of mourning.

By using his family nickname, the mourner is excluding the casual observer and, in the process, bringing the mourning of the subject back into a personal realm, making them feel closer to the artist. When we consider the mourning of Bowie in Brixton, we didn't see this same familiarity with the use of Bowie's real name, instead all the tributes were consciously addressed to Bowie the artist, rather than David Jones the man. This tells us that the shattering of the persona of George Michael in the mid-1990s, as well as alienating some fans, allowed other fans to see Michael as more of a human being with innate problems, than an untouchable artistic persona. The reference to 'heal the pain' on the sign is therefore two-fold in this circumstance. We see the mourner consciously referring to both the pain they perceived Michael to have gone through in his life, through the heartbreak, the alienation, and the press invasion, and the pain that the mourner feels in his passing. This is a direct continuation of the spoiled persona that the mourner is engaging with in these spaces. He was considered a tragic figure in death, a victim of fame, substance abuse, and the press, therefore there is a reclaiming of him in death through his fans in these sites. There is an intersection here with the kitsch objects at these sites; although seen as a negative by the critics of Michael's site, they can be seen as an expression of the spoiled identity and reclaiming of his space posthumously. Instead of the narratives of death we saw in the death of Bowie within the first analysis chapter of this thesis where fans focused their conversations to each other, these fans are trying to carve a direct line to Michael through these shrines. They are letting him know that although he is not seen as perfect that he was loved and with this they are reclaiming his identity to present to the wider culture.

When looking at the photographs of the shrine, we can see Bollas' 'unthought known' in action. The more traditional learnt behaviours of leaving flowers and even candles at the scene of the shrine, allow us to see, through the unthought known, what the mourners may have been thinking by leaving the more personalised and at first glance erratic objects at the shrine. The known in the unthought known here is the need to want to do something in the aftermath of Michael's death. In this process the mourners are using the everyday objects

around themselves to express this loss. As Gibson points out in her dissection of melancholy objects even 'the most mundane objects can rise in symbolic, emotional and mnemonic value' (Gibson, 2004, p. 292) after the death of a loved one.

Instead of objects that the mourners associated with Michael however, I argue that through the unthought known the objects they are leaving at these sites are traces of themselves. It is hard to see for instance that the picture frame or the lantern are related to Michael in a personal, or even artistic, way, however we can see that they are related to the mourner. As such, although Gibson's ideas highlight how objects are instilled with meaning that belong or remind you of the dead, they are instead showcasing the relationship of the mourner to the object. I believe the power in a celebrity shrine is reversed and instead the relationship between loss and the object is between the mourner and the object. This means that the object is not a surrogate for loss of the artist but rather a piece of the mourner that can be left behind as a connection to the artist.

The argument is starker when we look again at Figure 4.11. We initially see the objects relating to George Michael when we consider this picture, however, when we look beyond the images of Michael and the more traditional expressions of mourning, such as the flowers, we see objects that can be considered to be strange alongside them. For instance, leaving the Greek flag at this scene tallies with Michael's Cypriot heritage and his biography, however the Spanish flag does not do this. When we consider the Spanish flag through the unthought known, we can see that rather than an expression of the artist, this flag can be considered to an expression of the mourner. We cannot know the full meaning behind this, maybe it is where they saw him live, maybe it is their nationality, or something else, however, what we can infer from this is that it is a piece of the mourner they left within this space, to feel connected to a space associated with George Michael.

These more obscure objects seem to be addressed to onlookers, or even doubters at the shrine. We see this in the way that the most prominent piece we can see in this image is the one that is dedicated to the 'many talents of George Michael,' this naturally serves as not a message to Michael himself but rather a reminder to the casual onlooker what they are mourning. This is a re-establishing of persona in the posthumous realm, which we can link to the reclaiming of Michael's identity from 'Outside' and other controversies onwards. In a way this is a retrospective narrative being offered by the fans, but it seems to be more

complex and even broader than the ones being discussed in the posthumous understanding of Bowie. Rather, they want people to see the man behind the personas and reinforce that he was in fact a decent man with talent, rather than the hedonistic and joke character he was sometimes considered to be.

#### **4.8. Conclusion: Objects and the Unthought Known**

Looking at Figure 4.13, we see that the site exists in both a physical sense and within the remediation of the photograph. We can see by the detailed description and the use of hashtags that this image changes into something else on this site. It exists as a different site of mourning to the one being depicted, as the physical space is remediated and joined into the conversation and organisation of the online site. In some ways this is a traditional form of mediation and in others it isn't. It is certainly true that when the image of the site of mourning is taken and then transferred into the online realm of the Internet, there is a different level of engagement that may slip into a more casualised and nonchalant way of engaging with the site of mourning through the act of scrolling and passive engagement, something I will discuss in my chapter on Leonard Cohen. This casualisation splits both ways, regarding the observer of the site itself walking upon the physical site and the casual scroller coming across the remediated site of mourning. This remediation displaces the physical site and thus attending to the site itself is not mandatory to participating in the posted and engagement with these places. The labour of the fan comes into this, with the fan who is able to inhabit the place in a physical sense and then can showcase their work or their presence in these spaces can show this off.

In the description of this photograph the remediation of this site is key as the person not able to visit the shrine uses a surrogate to place the object for them. In this way the image of the shrine becomes the only connection with the objects that are being considered in these spaces. This highlights that for all the presence and sociability that these shrines offer a good deal of this is in the online realm where users project their presence at these shrines in its digital form and showcase their engagement with mourning this way. There are two sections to this mourning, with the first being the presence of the objects and their own

bodies at the shrines which can be considered to be for George Michael and all that he meant to them. The second section of this mourning is the remediation outwards. This is clearly not for the artist but rather serves the need of the mourner to be seen to be in the act of mourning. The presentation of the mourner within this becomes the central reason for the posting. This is an act of display, a learnt ritual that places the mourner at the heart of the mourning process. Within this the unthought known becomes galvanised and made sense of in this space. Something that can be understood as being an offhand gesture, maybe something that was near to the mourner at the time, is set in stone through the remediation of these spaces. As such, the unthought known becomes known as an evocative object in this space, its reason for being there maybe not known by the mourner but now known to onlookers and other mourners.

We can see this as an externalisation of the internal process of what Freud, Barthes and Derrida discussed in their writings on the mourning process. The use of the image and the remediation of these images of shrines, takes the ephemeral nature of mourning, and even if it is used as an act of working through, creates a record of it. But the ways in which the platforms are constructed creates a digital record of something ephemeral with the idea of infinite recall. This is the normalisation of an extraordinary process or event. Mourning although still a deeply personal practice, can be seen within these posts as manifesting itself in the wider culture in a more visible way than we would have seen pre-Internet.

## Figures 4.1 – 4.13



Figure 4.1



Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6



Figure 4.7



Figure 4.8

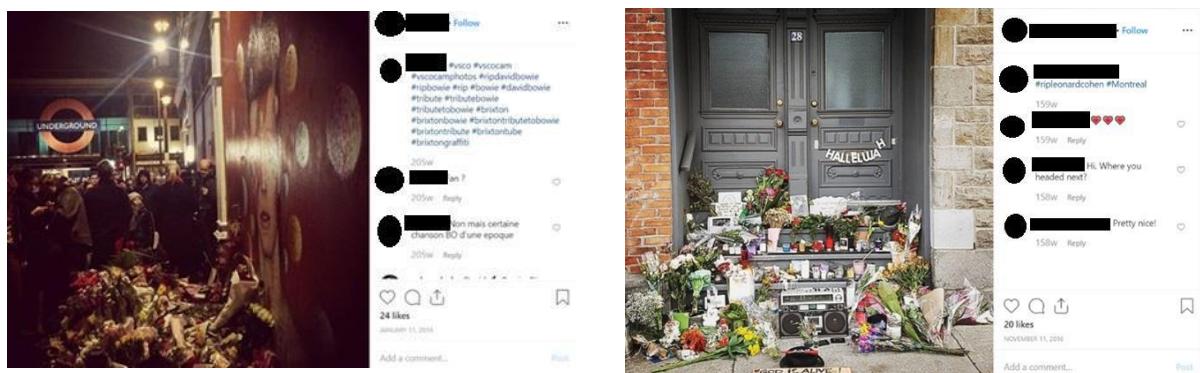


Figure 4.9



Figure 4.10



Figure 4.11



Figure 4.12



Figure 4.13

## **Chapter 4. The Teacher: Photographs and Words as Objects in the Mourning of Leonard Cohen**

### **5.1. Introduction: The Teacher**

Leonard Cohen died on the 7<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at the age of 82. Like the other case studies in this thesis, there was a considerable outpouring of mourning devoted to Cohen on social networking services across the Internet. Cohen was a poet, a songwriter, a musician, and was just as known for his immaculate dress style as his way with the pen. The reception of Cohen's passing was underpinned by the release of his final album only seventeen<sup>17</sup> days before his death, adding weight to the visual and lyrical presentations in his final works. The posts that followed the announcement of Cohen's death contained a mix of photographs, lyrics, and artistic interpretations. This chapter considers how images of Cohen, through photographs and more abstract representations, were posted, engaged with, and remediated throughout the social networking service Instagram in the immediate twenty-four hours after his death. As highlighted in section 1.5. of this thesis, Instagram is a social media service that is primarily visual. Its platform vernacular has evolved to privilege images over text, with the space of Instagram becoming synonymous with the 21<sup>st</sup> century phenomenon of self-presentation through personal images.

We can mourn as we remember, through the visual. Since photography's very inception in the 1830s, 'death has been one of its most prominent topics' (Mielczarek, 2020, p. 510). From the post-mortem photography that placed the dead within living situations (Borgo et al., 2016; Tateo, 2018), to the picture of the deceased that sits on the cover of a funeral order of service, we have increasingly placed the photographic image at the centre of our mourning process. We have shifted our ideas of what is socially acceptable, removing the photographs of the dead bodies from our society, as images of the dead became 'private and hidden' allowing us to shift 'the focus to pictures of the dead whilst living, as a means of

commemoration' (Mielczarek, 2020, p. 510). As such, the photographs of the person living have become an integral part of the mourning process.

This chapter is split into three sections, the first, section 5.2., discusses how photographs and images are used in the mourning process, and how this distils our emotions and memories into objects. This is done through the work of Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, highlighting how the photographic image both informs and distils death into an object that can be authenticated and consumed. The second, section 5.3., considers Cohen's persona throughout his career. I argue that Cohen's persona can be considered in two halves, the Lover and the Teacher, and how the Teacher persona ultimately came to underpin his death and mourning. The third and final of these, section 5.4., utilises the previous work to analyse Instagram posts of Cohen made in the immediate twenty-four hours after his death. This is further extended to consider how his visualised lyrics can be considered evocative objects through which the self-presentation of mourning is enacted. By contemplating the images of Cohen posted in the aftermath of his death, we will be able to determine the ways mourners saw Cohen and how they used these images to reflect this. There is an abstraction within this however, as the words become objects through the ways they are presented on Instagram. Ultimately, they become vessels in which the mourner can put forth their own self-presentation and identity through their engagement with online mourning practices.

## **5.2. Mourning Through Image: Photography and the Dead**

In Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis I have reinforced how words, objects, and social media have become vessels through which mourning can be enacted. Underpinning this is the visual image which mourners have utilised in the past, whether that is through painting or via the photograph. We are surrounded by visual stimuli, as David Gross points out:

No matter what the place or time of day, media, sounds, images, and messages are continuously available to be heard or seen. They saturate virtually every aspect of experience and work their way into the conscious or unconscious minds of most people who are exposed to them, they're making the modern [World] surely the

most media-mediated society that has ever existed (Gross, 2007, Quoted in Gibson, 2007, p. 415).

Therefore, as I have reiterated throughout this thesis, mass mediated society has had a profound and irreversible effect on the ways we mourn. Juanne Nancarrow Clarke argues that in the 'absence of personal experience with death, people rely on media for information, attitudes, beliefs and feelings about death and its meanings' (2005 – 2006, p. 154). As such, our relationship to death in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is underpinned by the visual, whether that is a picture of a person shown in a tribute, moving images of a funeral service, or a photo of a loved one who has passed.

Chapter 3 of this thesis concentrated on the tension that arises between the physical and mediated object. However, these were all mediated, engaged with, and displayed through the object of the digital photograph. Photography has acted as a means through which the memory of the dead can be externalised by the living. In the following sections I am going to discuss how the visual image has become an abstracted representation of the dead. Through this I will discuss how the photograph is seen as a representation of the living, whilst transposing memory into the object of the photograph, to be consumed and mourned.

### **5.2.1. Mourning through Photography**

In this section, I am going to return to the work of both Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag displays how the object of the photograph is inherently linked with death. In his book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes states that photography 'reproduces to infinity [that which] has occurred only once' (Barthes, 2000, p.4). He continues by stating that the 'photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially' (ibid). As such, photography's link to mourning is one of recording that which has been. At the very core of this art form is the recording and replicating of the past, whether that is of a moment, or of a person who is no longer here. Barthes continues his discussion of photography by framing his experience of being photographed. In this, death, for Barthes, stalks all photography.

Whilst being photographed, he first shifts himself into an artificial pose as he knows the photograph is coming, he then experiences 'a micro-vision of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a spectre' (ibid, p. 14) as the photograph is finally taken. Behind every picture there lies the 'return of the dead' (ibid, p. 9) as we relive moments which have passed. The act of image capture has 'transferred subject into object' (ibid, p. 13), whereupon the subject has turned into the object of the photograph. Here lies the death which Barthes describes, as both the moment of the picture has passed and the subject has transformed into a lifeless object.

The static nature of the subject within photography bridges the gap between the living and the dead. Through the capture of images, 'death [is] seen in the person' (Barthes, 2000, p.14) as the past is immortalised into the object. Barthes states that this is the person being made into 'total image ' (ibid, p. 14), we are subsequently left behind as an autonomous living subject; all we are now is the object, the image. It is in this transformation where Barthes states death is inscribed, he asserts that in the photograph 'death is eidos' (ibid, p. 15). Eidos here relates to the distinctive character of an activity, culture, or social group. Barthes restates that through the transformation of subject into object, death is inscribed in our presentation as image. Instead of death being apparent in the visual nature of these photographs, death is instead inscribed in these photograph's ability to record life. Whilst depicting our past lives, they become the documents of the dead.

Barthes was building on Susan Sontag's ideas that death and photography are intrinsically linked. In her book *On Photography*, she builds on the notion of death as the eidos of photography. She states that the link between 'photography and death haunts all photographs of people' (Sontag, 1977, p. 55). This haunting positions photography as an 'interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask' (Sontag, 1977, p. 120). As such, the photograph marks the switch from subject to object, acting as a link to the past, while also highlighting how this past no longer exists. As a result of this, all photographs are memento mori. They both offer a reminder of the past we have lived and a past that is lost, one that is constructed by loss. Sontag elaborates on this through the process of taking a photograph, stating that: 'To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to

time's relentless melt' (Sontag, 1977, p. 11). By transferring a snapshot of the past into an object, we are divorcing that section of the past from its context whilst highlighting the fleeting nature of time.

If death is inscribed into the object of the photograph, its trace, as Barthes and Sontag term it, reminds the onlooker of death. In this reminder mourning is inherently felt, understood, and attached to the photograph's *eidos*. Barthes articulates this relationship through a photograph of his mother. Here, mourning is felt through the recognition of the subject, now the object of the photograph, as being in the past. The photograph is a memory aid for Barthes to concentrate and focus his mourning onto. The image Barthes considers is a photograph of his mother as a young woman. The essence of photography, for Barthes, lies in this photograph. It at once recalls and reinforces the dead, but it is also 'a certificate of presence' (Barthes, 2000, p. 87). A reminder that what has been frozen in time 'has indeed existed' (ibid, p. 82).

To consider how his mourning is manifested, Barthes develops the dichotomy of the *studium* and the *punctum*. Through these two terms, Barthes identifies the characteristics of photographic art which give it power. The *studium* and the *punctum* both exist inside of the subject, or the object of the photograph, and they cannot be teased from one another (Barthes, 2000, p. 42). The *studium* is described by Barthes as the thing that initially draws the viewer into the photograph (ibid, p. 30). This is the surface layer of the photograph, showcasing the subject such as a person, event, or landscape. The *punctum* on the other hand is the elements that 'puncture the *studium*' (ibid, p. 27), the emotional prick, or mark, left by the photograph, or as Barthes puts it, the elements which become 'poignant to me' (ibid, p. 27). The *punctum* is relative, it can be something different to each person. The *punctum* 'is an addition: it is what [you] add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there' (ibid, p. 55). This is the emotional element that moves the image beyond its mere literal representational value. It is in this move into the emotional realm where mourning and photography are most linked.

As mentioned previously, Barthes concentrates the mourning for his mother on the photograph of her as a younger woman. Within section 2.2.3 of this thesis, I highlighted how this photograph acts as a bridge that prolongs and undermines Barthes's mourning process, allowing his mourning to linger long after the death. But if we consider the photographic

means through which he does this, we can see its power in the mourning process. For Barthes, the studium of this picture is an image of his mother as a young child, through which he recognises a trace of the woman he would come to know. But the punctum here is the deeper level of this photograph which moves beyond mere representation, transforming it into an object of mourning. While looking at the photograph, Barthes does not recognise the woman he is looking at, but rather features which he can relate to his mother as he knew her. With this in mind, the punctum of this photograph exists on two levels for Barthes. The first is that the future death of his mother is inscribed into an image of the past he does not recognise. He is trying to induce ‘the effect it produces upon [him] not to restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance) but to attest that what [he] see[s] has indeed existed’ (Barthes, 2000, p. 82). This highlights how all photography is a recollection of something gone, with the image of the mother representing the ‘living image of a dead thing’ (*ibid*, p.79).

The second punctum that Barthes sees is the way that all photography is inscribed with the mortality of the spectator. Within the image of the mother, he sees not just her death but also his ‘own death inscribed’ (Barthes, 2000, p. 93). On both of these levels, there exists the idea that mourning is enhanced by the use of an image, but in this realisation, the image is changed forever. For Barthes this happens when he looks upon the photograph and as well as seeing his own death, he shudders and laments ‘over a catastrophe which has already occurred’ (*ibid*, p. 96), that of his mother’s death. Once you have the knowledge that the subject of the photograph has died, the image takes on an extra level of poignancy. Rather than just showing a moment or a past that can never be recovered, as we can interpret from Barthes’s ideas that all photography is death, the knowledge that the subject is no longer living is the overriding punctum of mourning images. For instance, when we look upon photographs of Leonard Cohen, which we will later in this chapter, once we learn of his death it is impossible to view the images without being punctured by this realisation.

### **5.2.2. *The Object of the Photograph***

In Barthes's dissection of photography, when the subject turns into the object, death is inscribed into the photograph. However, its formation into an object - the photograph - both allows the subject to live on through the images, but also to be replicated and disseminated as an object. Michael Erin claims that this switch allows us to resist 'death by mourning and immortalizing the object, by taking its subject-as-object out of history, time, and the processes of decay and death' (Erin, 2000, p. 1). Erin reframes what Barthes considered a weakness of photography, its representation of something which has gone, into a strength. In this way Erin highlights what the photographers and consumers of images are trying to grasp in mourning; the ability for the image to be available as a mourning aid to the living.

The photograph, as a cultural object, is a memory aid. Through their discussions of mnemonic objects, Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering centre the photograph as a tool in which personal and collective cultural memories are mediated and stored. Through their ethnographic research they claim that:

The subject engages imaginatively with what is retained from the past and, moving across time, continuously rearranges the hotchpotch of experience into relatively coherent narrative structures. (2012, p.43)

This reinforces the use of the photograph as an addendum to our cultural and personal memory, framing how and what we remember. Keightley and Pickering state that recollecting or remembering 'involves imaginatively working on the past in order to vicariously relive certain experiences in the present' (2012, p. 47). As such, the memories we engage with exist in a precarious space between the object we use as a memory aid, and our own fallible ability to recount them. Keightley and Pickering emphasise this by stating that we place images in the realm of remembering, forever linking them to the concept of 'seeing', as evidenced by the use of phrases such as 'the mind's eye' (2012, p. 48). This is externalised through the use of photographs and the objects we use to mediate our memories, as seen in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The materiality of photography is self-evident when considering analogue photography as a tangible object which someone can hold. People engage with the physical external memory aid of the picture which can be understood as a solid object. Nevertheless, when we consider how this is transferred into the digital realm, the picture on a screen becomes more abstract in its definition as a photographic object. Keightley and Pickering start their analysis of analogue and digital photography by claiming that 'the digital photograph is less proximate, less tangible, less possessable, with the screen altering the effectiveness of the photograph as a vehicle of memory' (2014, p. 584). However, through their ethnographic analysis of the uses of digital photography they find that there is 'a continual interweaving of established and emergent practices' (ibid, p. 589) between the analogue and digital. This is underscored by the work of José Van Dijck who contended that 'personal photography has not changed as a result of digital technologies; the changing function of photography is part of a complex technological, social and cultural transformation' (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 59–60). Therefore, as discussed in the other chapters of this thesis, it is the ways we engage with technology that have changed, rather than the objects changing per se. Keightley and Pickering place this argument in the realm of technological essentialism, arguing that:

moments of historical change are not starkly identifiable in any temporally singular or isolated manner and do not suddenly become manifest because of the widespread take-up of some newly marketed item of technology like the digital camera (2014, p. 589)

As such, it can be inferred that the ways we use these photographs, i.e. the hardware, may have changed but our emotional relationships with what the image depicts have not.

Elizabeth Edwards discusses the materiality of the photograph in the digital age, stating that the photograph is separated into 'co-presences of the visual image and its material and performative qualities' (2019, p. 99). She explains that, through digital technologies, the ways in which the object of the photograph can be engaged with go beyond that of the analogue photograph. She asserts that the material qualities of the photograph album, instead of becoming obsolete in their transition to the digital, have in fact 'carried over into new digital environments' (ibid, p. 100). Through her ethnographic work concerning people's attitudes to photography's material qualities, she found that the people she interviewed 'stressed [the] sharing, exchange, and relationships...[with] photographs...still

pertains today in the marketing of social media' (ibid, p. 101). Consequently, people have the same reactions, same emotions, the same experience upon seeing a digital photograph compared to an analogue one.

The online ways of viewing, through sites such as Instagram, have not altered the emotional connection that is engrained in these images. Indeed, there is a physicality in these spaces as Edwards points out:

Using such facilities involves their own material qualities' sensory and embodied practices. The proxemics of viewing in groups around a screen, the finger on the keyboard, the sweeping movement and click of the mouse, the flicker of the screen or the stroking movements of the touch screen - all demand embodied, material engagement (Edwards, 2019, p. 106)

Through this we can understand that, although the physicality of the photograph as an object is abstracted by the move into digital photography, there still remains a physicality and materiality to the photograph on social media. As such, the object of the digital photograph is still an evocative object through which mourning can be enacted. Ultimately, Barthes' ideas of the subject becoming the still image is not threatened by the turn towards digital photography. The ways we use digital photographs are not inconsistent with Barthes' discussions and in fact, the emotional and evocativeness of photographs is not effected in the turn towards digital. In the next section I will discuss these concepts while looking at the images mourners uploaded in the aftermath of Leonard Cohen's death and how music artists are mourned through photography on social networking services.

### **5.3. Authenticating Leonard Cohen's Persona(s)**

To understand Leonard Cohen's persona in the latter parts of his life, it is integral to understand how this has developed over time, culminating in the ways his last album, and ultimately his death, were perceived. Scholars and journalists have consciously linked Leonard Cohen's careers as a poet, a musician, an author, and at one stage a monk, to weave a complex character who is at once a silent all-knowing religious figure, and a lover

and student of women. This section, like the others in this thesis, is not a full biography of Cohen or a discussion of his work beyond his persona and the presentation therein.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, this section is going to consider how Cohen's persona was understood in the years prior to his death, and how this was ultimately established in the public consciousness at the time of his passing. I will do this by discussing the personas that permeated Cohen's career throughout: that of the Lover and the Teacher.

From his early albums as a musical artist, there was an emphasis on Cohen's ability to bridge the gap between poetry and music. Jonathan Locke Hart puts it succinctly while discussing Cohen's place in the late 1950s and 1960s Montreal literary scene: 'Cohen was first a poet before he became a maker of song lyrics' (Hart, 2020, p. 462). In an early academic article on Cohen, the English literature academic Nancy Wetherell highlights that Cohen's music was always seen through the lens of poetry and vice versa (1973, p. 552). The themes that Cohen explored in his poetry subsequently manifested themselves into his music. The twin subjects of religion and love as cultural and textual constructions, worked their way through Cohen's repertoire, both being seen as 'magnetic, mystical, and all-encompassing' (Wetherell, 1973, p. 552). As such, this imagery interweaves 'throughout the poetry' (*ibid*) and his music. With this in mind, the persona of Cohen as a musician and as a poet cannot be separated, and in fact, the latter underpins aspects of Cohen's persona which made him distinct from other musicians of the time, focusing on him as a wiser older man, a teacher to the young.

### **5.3.1. The Lover**

The Lover persona permeated the presentation of Cohen's work in the early stages of his musical and poetry career. From the headline of an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine seen in Figure 5.1, we can infer that there was an emphasis on Cohen as a champion and worshipper of women. This has been highlighted by writers as a central part of the early career and persona of Cohen, marking him out as "part wolf, part angel" (Huston, qtd. in de

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<sup>2</sup> For a look into Cohen's life and career, see Sylvie Simmons' unrivalled biography *I'm Your Man*: (Simmons 2017)

Lisle, n.p.), and characterised as both a lover and a pursuer of women. We can see this in a particular cringeworthy scene from the documentary film *Bird on a Wire* where Cohen is seen backstage trying to, in his own words, 'pick up a girl' with the cameras present (*Leonard Cohen: Bird on a Wire*, 1974). In this he has both the wolf and angel character traits that authors have highlighted, but at the centre of this, the principal character he inhabits is the Lover, gaining artistic powers, inspiration, and muses from his love of women.

These public presentations sat alongside songs such as 'So Long Marianne' and 'Suzanne', in which Cohen presented himself as a lover and understander of women. The 'Casanova reputation' (Marquis, 2013, p. 18) which this cultivated, underscored the Lover persona his music, poetry, and record company presented to the world. Christopher Lebold highlights how this persona was a co-construction by both Cohen the poet and his record label at the time, Columbia. These songs and performances:

earned him an image as a modern troubadour. So much so that from the very start of his musical career, much early press coverage as well as most of Columbia Records' marketing strategy exploited that image of Cohen as a poet of love and devotee of women (Lebold, 2018, p. 2)

This Lover persona is manifested in what Lebold calls the 'modern troubadour' trope that Cohen and his record label presented to the media (see Figure 5.1 and the advertisement of his mid-1970s album *New Skin for the Old Ceremony*), Cohen being both the singer and the writer of love songs. These songs were considered to reveal some kind of 'truth,' not just about Cohen but about the wider human condition of love, underpinned by poetry and multiple forms of spirituality.

Lebold continues their comparison between Cohen and the tradition of the troubadours by highlighting how both used love as the basis for their understanding of the society they inhabited (Lebold, 2018, p. 4). It is at this point that the undertones, and more often overtones, of religion and broad spirituality need to be acknowledged within Cohen's work. For Lebold, this links back to Cohen as a troubadour, where the:

Ideological element that Cohen borrows from the troubadours' world is the metaphor of love as fire and the related idea that love is inherently an ordeal in the

medieval sense of the word: a trial and judgement that lead to either death or to spiritual perfection. (Lebold, 2018, p. 4).

This persona developed from the very beginning of Cohen's work, with love and spirituality becoming interlinked and acting as surrogates for one another. As such, the persona of the Lover came to be seen as a spiritual being, and emphasis was placed on the theological underpinnings of Cohen's work and the metaphors therein. This shift in meaning underpinned the pivoting of Cohen's 1970s work to the more developed sound, subject, and voice we saw in the 1980s. In his book *The Late Voice*, Richard Elliott relates the troubadour persona to the tradition of chanson singers, emphasising Cohen's speaking-esque vocal delivery as a large facet of his identity (Elliott, 2015, p. 132). This is underscored by discourses around Cohen's work which have placed emphasis on the provenance of his career as a poet and the importance of words over music that these origins dictated.

It is impossible to pinpoint where each of Cohen's personas began or ended within his career. Rather, the difference between the Lover and Teacher persona I am discussing here is marginal, each being present in Cohen's work up until his death. This period is typified by the release of the Phil Spector-produced *Death of a Ladies' Man* (Leonard Cohen, 1977), rerouting the perception of Cohen's work away from the troubadour facsimile to something different, more focused on spirituality and social issues. Christopher Lebold, in his dissection of Cohen's persona, states that this was a change enacted slowly:

the ladies' man persona slowly turned into that of a spiritually oriented crooner. The new conception of love that gradually emerged was broader and more spiritual (although it included sexual love): the force that holds the universe together (Lebold, 2018, p. 8)

Richard Elliott links Cohen's persona presentation to the voice in *The Late Voice* (2015), building on Sylvie Simmons' assertion that Cohen was considered old, wise or beyond his actual years, and that these qualities were manifested in his voice's timbre (Simmons, 2017).

There was a noticeable transition in Cohen's voice throughout the end of the 1970s, his work in the 1980s, and beyond. This was starker than those of his contemporaries, with Elliott stating that 'Cohen's voice does change over the course of his career, more noticeably

so than those of Bob Dylan or Neil Young' (2015, p. 129). Cohen as the Teacher persona embodied this late voice paradigm in both his early career and the later stages of his life. Sylvie Simmons in her biography of Cohen: *I'm Your Man* (2017), describes Cohen's voice in this period as being 'suspended somewhere between word and song' (p. 445). This period was when the voice was considered to have caught up with the persona of the wise and cultured elder statesmen, finally inhabiting the voice that Elliott terms his early late voice. You can hear the difference between Cohen's voice in the 1970s and in the 1980s, the latter being noticeably deeper, richer, and hoarser compared to his previous work. This Cohen replaced the younger one in our cultural imagination. As such, the voice is one of the conduits through which we can view the continuation and, at times, separation of Cohen's career from the Lover persona to the Teacher.

### **5.3.2. The Teacher**

The spiritual elements of Cohen's persona, although ever-present, were strengthened with the pivot towards the Teacher persona. By this persona, I am referring to the period after Cohen's 1970s work and the self-declared, almost certainly ironic, *Death of the Ladies' Man* album. Harry Freedman links this period and the development of Cohen's unique style that blended biography (Chelsea Hotel no.2), religion (The Butcher) and wider cultural issues (The Future; Democracy) to the idea of the Paytan. In Jewish history and theology, a Paytan is described as:

[knowing] the Bible inside out and have a masterly grasp of all the fables and legends with which later generations had embellished it. Like Leonard Cohen, the Paytan took ancient fables and legends and made them relevant to the world they lived in, to the congregation listening to his composition. (Freedman, 2021, p. 140)

Here Freedman articulates how Cohen's spiritual lineage was engrained in the work from his career's start. Drawing upon Cohen's nods to and retellings of Jewish fables, history, and aspects of the Jewish experience (seen in songs such as: Story of Isaac), Cohen showcases his spirituality whilst drawing upon the world around him, rearticulating this into meaningful

words and songs. Christopher Lebold highlights this aspect of Cohen's persona further by drawing on the Jewish tradition of Tikkun, where excerpts of prayers, writings of the prophets, and other passages are read out during holy festivals. As discussed previously, Cohen's vocal delivery, spoken rather than sung, reflects the character of the Paytan in a religious setting, placing Cohen more in the realm of a bible scholar reciting the scriptures than a pop performer.

Cohen embodied the Jewish tradition of poets and musicians who transformed their faith into spiritual expressions. With this in mind, it is worth pointing out the messiness of this persona and its place in the chronology of Cohen's life. This concept of the prophet, the leader of a religion, has permeated Cohen's persona throughout his life. Freedman brings this back to his very beginnings as a poet:

He was, however, frequently referred to, by fans and journalists, as a prophet, a role he'd imposed on himself in 1963, when he castigated the local community in his speech at the Montreal Jewish Public Library. He'd condemned their lack of spirituality and told them that they needed a prophet (Freedman, 2021, p.142)

This tells us that the Teacher persona has been ever-present throughout Cohen's career, marrying the ways in which religion, his performance, and his voice are established in the vessel of the performer.

The Teacher persona is characterised as being both reflective of a higher truth, underpinned by spirituality and religion, and reflecting something within the modern world that was lacking. Freedman distils Cohen's persona down to a 'spiritual vision fuelled by half a century of erotic experimentation and biblical, Hasidic, Zen, and Christian studies' (Freedman, 2021, p.12). Sylvie Simmons reinforces the Teacher persona manifesting itself through religious thought, stating that when she was with Cohen he would recite obscure parts of the Kabbalah, adding 'sometimes we would be talking about one thing and come back to that thing, "here we go again." He could be a great teacher of Judaism. If that were his thing, to be a rabbi, he had it in his power to have been one of the greatest of our generation' (Simmons, 2017, p. 359). In Cohen's music, just as in his day-to-day life, the experience of religion, love, sex, history, and faith are all interlinked.

### **5.3.3. Authenticating Cohen**

We can see that up to this point Cohen's persona supposedly removed the performance artifice expected of other artists. Using Allan Moore's categorising of authenticities (2002), Cohen inhabited an unassailable first person authenticity. Moore states that the first person authenticity is the:

authenticity of expression, or what I also term 'first person authenticity', arises when an originator (composer, performer) succeeds in conveying the impression that his/her utterance is one of integrity, that it represents an attempt to communicate in an unmediated form (Moore, 2002, p. 214)

Cohen inhabited a persona constructed by the music industry of integrity and originality, while his musical delivery, voice included, highlighted the ways he was mediated. It is clear that Cohen represented an authenticity that was embedded in his performances from the start, giving the impression that he was depicting his own thoughts, feelings, and sincerely held beliefs. The Teacher persona lies in this, as fans engage with Cohen on the premise that this is truly who he is and what he believes, drawing lessons and strength from Cohen's imperfect depiction of the human condition.

Cohen's image has remained remarkably stable throughout his life, the 'lazy bastard living in a suit,' as he termed himself in the song 'Going Home' (Cohen, 2012). Cohen can be seen to have semiotically inhabited the same visual space throughout his career. Instead of detracting from his early lateness, his visual presentation reinforced it. As others adapted, keeping up with styles in their presentation and dress sense, Cohen remained the same, with his suit and hat in place. This reinforces the outsider, older, and wiser image that underpinned his persona throughout the years. The unfaltering image of Cohen also reinforces the first-person authenticity that the audience presented upon him; he was always unashamedly himself in the face of stylistic and societal changes. Sylvie Simmons describes Cohen dressed in his suit as an ever-present feature in both first hand and third hand recollections of his life. Simmons describes the suit as a uniform (2017, p. 8) in which Cohen would be seen throughout his life, no matter the occasion. As such, the suit becomes a visual sign of Cohen, representing himself and his work. This is cemented in one

memorable line from his biography, when Cohen turns to Simmons and proclaims 'Darling... I was born in a suit' (2017, p. 8).

The ever present suit gave continuity to Cohen's visual aesthetic through the Teacher persona. He was seen as separate from others in the way he presented himself, consciously distancing himself from students as the teacher at the front of the class. The Teacher persona came to a natural conclusion when Cohen turned his back on music to live, and at times perform, as a monk in 1994 at the Mt. Baldy Zen Centre in Los Angeles. Through this act, he bolstered his commitment to the religious and spiritual elements in his music and lyrics, giving them a further layer of authenticity. Fans could see that he now lived a spiritual life instead of just preaching about one. The persona of Cohen was added to at this point; he was the poet, the spiritual teacher, the writer of fables and love songs, and he embodied the traditions of Jewish mysticism and wider religions and religious thought, through both the work he left behind and the life he now pursued as a monk.

#### **5.3.4. You Want it Darker?**

Leonard Cohen's life as a monk was shattered abruptly after it emerged that his pension had been stolen by his then management team. This paved the way for his return from self-imposed exile and facilitated the release of new music in 2001, the album *Ten New Songs*. Cohen returned to music an older man with the early late style voice intact, however, what Richard Elliott and others have previously termed Cohen's 'early lateness' (Elliott, 2015, p. 138) at this point has transitioned into Cohen's late lateness. The culmination of his musical return took place in what Pamela Erens calls the 'end of career triad,' centring on the release of his final three albums: *Old Ideas* (2012), *Popular Problems* (2014), and *You Want it Darker* (2016) (Erens, 2018, p. 205). In this section, I am going to focus on the last of these albums, *You Want it Darker*, which was released October 21<sup>st</sup> 2016, 17 days before Cohen's death. In particular, I am going to focus on the title track 'You Want it Darker' and how this was an expression of Cohen's posthumous persona.

Richard Elliott claims that these last albums are a combination of both his early lateness, embodied into the perspective that Cohen was always old (and now actually is), and the burgeoning late lightness that is represented by the playful way he presents some of the songs (Elliott, 2015, p. 132). We therefore have to view this period as a continuation of his previous personas rather than Cohen inhabiting something new entirely. This is typified by how Erens argues that in *You Want it Darker* ‘Cohen turns more insistently to the theme of mortality’ (Erens, 2018, p. 205). However, in his dissection of the ways Cohen’s later works were received by critics, Richard Elliott points out that this was a subject Cohen had been presenting and grappling with throughout his career. He states: ‘If death and finality were key notes in the press response to *Old Ideas*, many critics also highlighted the consistency of Cohen’s work throughout his career’ (Elliott, 2023). As such, these albums were not outliers in Cohen’s back catalogue, but rather continuations of themes he had been working with for years.

Throughout these final albums, however, Cohen’s proximity to death was more apparent than in his previous work. As discussed above, Cohen’s persona and image remained largely intact throughout his career and these last three albums are no different. Instead, what changed was the position of Cohen in life, this is mirrored in a quote by John Prine near the end of his life:

I think that when I write about the idea of mortality—not just now, but earlier—it might have to do with something in my sense of humor. Mortality is a natural target for it. I’ve written songs where I’ve talked about a guy dies and goes straight to heaven, and this happens or that happens. It’s a target that I’m drawn to, to get my humor through. So like right now, because I’m seventy-one, all of a sudden articles are going, “This guy’s writing about mortality,” whereas before they thought I was just joking. I think that’s part of it. ‘Cause it’s not like I haven’t written about it before. It’s just I wasn’t seventy-one before. (Prine in Piazza, 2018).

As such, we understand Cohen, these albums, and subsequently all of his work, in the wider narrative of his life. What I termed ‘retrospective narrative’ in Chapter 2 of this thesis continues in the case of Cohen, though it is important to note the way Cohen’s stable persona provided a different space where the narrative of his passing can be understood. Late style is manifested throughout this period, however, with Cohen this is underscored

through his early lateness and seen as a culmination and continuation of his previous work rather than an outlier. The Teacher persona represents this continuity, framing the now elderly Cohen as having the age and experience to back up his spiritual and life lessons. We cannot disregard the continuity of Cohen's persona, however, and with the proximity of his death I would argue the Teacher persona enacts and displays more potency to his fans. Aubrey Glazer points out this position succinctly, stating: '*You Want it Darker* [was where] two friendly voices concatenated—one, a congregant; the other, a teacher' (Glazer, 2017, p. 240).

From the outset of *You Want it Darker*, the audience is faced with explicit themes of both Jewishness (a surrogate for spirituality here) and mortality. This is apparent from the first line of the chorus, which are the opening words of the Mourner's Kaddish, the Jewish prayer recited by bereaved relatives during their statutory period of mourning. The opening line: 'Magnified, sanctified, be the holy name' (Leonard Cohen, 2016) is a direct translation, of 'Yitgadal v'yitkadesh shmei rabah' (Field, 2017, n.p.). The Kaddish in Jewish tradition is a 'doxology', a phrase that is repeated to praise 'the God whose deeds far surpass our understanding' (Freedman, 2021, p. 137). Aubrey Glazer asserts that Cohen's use of the Kaddish was a 'call to love [whilst] approaching death' (2017, p. 242), which Cohen ultimately accepted with 'great courage' (p.242). This mirrors the retrospective narrative that was utilised after Bowie's death. In both discourses there was an emphasis on the artist's actions being deliberate, paving their way towards death with grace through artistic statements. However, differing from Bowie, the use of the Kaddish by Cohen 'emerges in the song that the bard is now recalling as active remembrance, both for these and for his own soul' (Glazer, 2017, p. 244). Glazer continues, stating that these references enhance Cohen's later works by being explicit in their conjuring of these Jewish traditions, particularly through an emphasis on the liturgical moves that underpin Jewish rituals (Glazer, 2017, p. 244). By using these words, Cohen is drawing on a tradition that is steeped in the ritual and practices of mourning, signalling that he, the teacher, is ready to say goodbye.

We can see this articulated particularly strongly through the use of the word 'Hineni' which haunts the song throughout, translated as 'Here I am.' The word has particular connotations

in the Jewish tradition as the declaration Isaiah makes when God asks for someone for a task:

And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I (hineni)! Send me.' Isaiah 6:8 (Snow, 2021)

Isaiah accepts this call before knowing what God truly wants of him. As a result of this, the phrase now represents a surrender of will towards God in the Jewish tradition. The use of 'Hineni' by Cohen garnered a lot of speculation and attention through Jewish dissections of the album; The Rabbi Brian Field stated that the word is 'perhaps the most spiritually significant word in the entire Torah,' as it articulates 'the Divine call that takes them on a journey far beyond their comfort zone' (Field, 2017, n.p.). As such, Cohen is using the phrase as an articulation of his willingness to come face to face with God in his death. As he did with the Kaddish, he is placing himself consciously in the Jewish tradition. He is presenting himself as a learned member of the community, using the rituals and phrases passed down to him to express his surrender at what he perceived to be the end. Within this, Cohen is positioning himself at the centre of both the spirituality and the mortality that underpinned his work from the start, bookending his career, in both a literal and a spiritual sense. There is a pleasing final cadence to the use of the Jewish traditions in which Cohen was raised. This is articulated by David Remnick in the *New Yorker* magazine, who claims this was a conscious artistic decision by Cohen who 'asked Gideon Zelermeyer, the cantor at Shaar Hashomayim, the synagogue of his youth in Montreal, to sing the backing vocals' (Remnick, 2016). In this act, Cohen is linking his spiritual beginnings to his end, creating a form of closure to his life.

Whilst discussing the album at the Official Residence of Canada, Cohen himself addressed the use of 'Hineni' and its meaning:

Hineni, that declaration of readiness no matter what the outcome, that's a part of everyone's soul. We all are motivated by deep impulses and deep appetites to serve, even though we may not be able to locate that which we are willing to serve. So, this is just a part of my nature, and I think everybody else's nature, to offer oneself at the moment, at the critical moment when the emergency becomes articulate. It's only

when the emergency becomes articulate that we can locate that willingness to serve (Cohen, 2016, quoted in Freedman, 2021, p. 138).

Cohen's deconstruction here sheds light on the ways he wanted his last pieces of music to be received. The 'emergency' here is the existentialism presented to someone at the end of one's life, where the spiritual becomes more pertinent and the closeness with the divine becomes less of an academic question and more of a pressing concern. 'Virtually with his final breaths, Leonard Cohen was reaffirming his Jewish identity and reasserting his belief in the vertical, the ineffable presence of "God in our midst"' (Posner, 2017, p. 516). Locke Hart distils this down further, stating that 'Cohen seems, in a kind of poem-song of prayer, to prepare, with humility, for his end in this world of dark and light' (2020, p. 474). Therefore, we can understand 'Hineni' as the expression of Cohen nearing the finality of his career.

If we turn our attention to the visuality of the album art (seen in Figure 5.2, we see Cohen sitting in a full white room, his hand visibly holding a cigarette whilst leaning into the darkness of the surrounding black. In this image, Cohen sits in an obvious barrier between light and dark, the dead and the living, as the focus on him transcends the literal and metaphorical barrier of the window to be half in the light and half in the dark. Here, Cohen's persona mirrors that of his previous incarnations with the same suit and hat combination he had been wearing for years. These visual elements hint at what Locke Hart termed Cohen's world 'of dark and light' (2020, p. 474). The album art becomes more poignant upon Cohen's death, creating a continuity between the 'light' and 'dark' referenced in his lyrics. The inside sleeve of the album centres on a dove, a constant visual representation of Cohen throughout his life and his religious thought. Within the sleeve, the dove flies between the dark and the light, further reinforcing the spirituality of the album and the meeting of light and dark in its themes.

### **5.3.5. *The Blackstar Wants it Darker***

Cohen's death came only 17 days after the album's release. Just like with Bowie's *Blackstar*, this timing reinforced the underlying elements of mortality and finality that was manifest in

the musical, visual, and lyrical content of the album. Within this again lies the Teacher persona. Although the underlying Jewish themes of the album were about surrendering to the will of the unknown, Cohen was creating a humane way to face up to death. Just as the retrospective narrative manifested itself in the discourses of Bowie's last album, so too was this album considered Cohen's expression of finality. As reinforced in section 3.7. in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the narrative of Cohen's passing was seen in the frame of Bowie's. There was a general framing of mourning that linked Bowie's death to Cohen's from the posters on Reddit. Consequently, Cohen's death cannot be considered in the isolation of his career and his personas. Rather, there is a continual mythscape on these sites that formulates and articulates responses to the artist's death. Therefore, the particular ways Cohen was considered, for instance through his Jewishness and age, were understood within the vein of the prevailing posting culture.

The discourses surrounding the immediate aftermath of Cohen's last album and the retrospective narratives around his death reinforced how Cohen showed his fans *how to die*. However, unlike the retrospective narrative that only emerged after Bowie's death, Cohen has cultivated this persona throughout his career, arriving at its final stage in the immediate period before his death. As such, Cohen is a more potent teacher of *how to die* than perhaps Bowie was, building on an entire career steeped in questions of spirituality and mortality rather than just one album. This was underpinned by his visual aesthetic, with the continuity of the suited Teacher persona evident throughout the final albums. All of this reinforces the fans' perception of what Cohen meant to the wider culture: he was a poet, a teacher, and represented a way of articulating the human condition. With the visuality of mourning in mind, the next section will discuss how the power of photography frames the mourning process and how ultimately this underpins our understanding of memory, loss, and mourning objects.

#### **5.4. Leonard Cohen and the Images of Mourning**

In the above sections, I have highlighted how Leonard Cohen's persona was constructed and presented in the period prior to his death. He was considered a great teacher, leading the

way into the afterlife, offering solace to his fans with the words and actions of his later years. Furthermore, using Barthes' theories, I have suggested that photography is an extension of the person, a technology of memory utilised in mourning. We engage with our favourite artists on multiple levels; we don't just know what they sound like or their life stories, we also know what they look like. Popular music builds on the ways the music and ethos of the musician is reflected back at the fan through their physical presentations. As such, the image of the musician becomes entangled with our perceptions of the music, marrying the two together in the object of the persona.

Photographs, and the representations therein, are centred on our society's understanding of what is or is not acceptable to show in the aftermath of someone's death. If after Cohen's death we were presented with photographs depicting his corpse in live positions or even his body lying in state like an old soviet leader, it would be judged to be in bad taste. In this, Erving Goffman's notion of 'appropriateness' (Goffman, 1971) needs to be considered in the ways we present the artist posthumously. The photographs we use in the aftermath of an artist's death have to adhere to our modern western notion of what is and is not public or private in loss. For instance, privacy for the family of the deceased has become an important precedent in the proceeding days or weeks of a celebrity death. Increasingly, the close family of the celebrity asks the public to respect their personal mourning and to give them space. The body of the artist is kept away from the fan, and the photographs of their past self becomes the means through which mourning can be enacted.

Adam Drazin and David Frohlich use the term 'morally correct material practices' (2007, p. 51) to describe the photographs we choose to showcase in the aftermath of tragedy. This is an important social trait that is considered almost subconsciously following a celebrity's death. As Edwards points out, these morally correct qualities:

only become visible when there is a mismatch - an inappropriateness- between image content and material form: the war photograph aestheticized on the gallery wall, the wedding photograph casually stuck on with a fridge magnet, rather than being in a silver frame (Edwards, 2019, p. 100)

Therefore, we can infer that the proceeding photographs adhere to our socially constructed understanding of what is, or isn't, appropriate to share in the aftermath of the artist's

death. Ultimately, this creates a bank of images from which to choose, with each fan picking the Cohen they think represents them best. In this first analysis section, I am going to discuss the images used by fans in the immediate aftermath of Cohen's death. I will then discuss what these can tell us about the persona and the object of the photograph in the mourning process on social networking services.

#### **5.4.1. *Lazy Bastard Living in a Suit***

Whilst looking at the images of Cohen posted in the aftermath of his death, we are faced with the prospect that they are remarkably similar to each other. As pointed out in section 5.3., Cohen's image had been a stable element throughout his performing life. Cohen himself becomes the evocative object in these posts, he acts as a conduit through which mourning can be expressed and understood. His Teacher persona is permanently here, seen through the ways he holds himself, forever wearing the suit 'uniform' and looking pensive. Alongside this uniform, we are greeted with the older Cohen, as fans particularly utilise images from his last three albums. In this section, I am going to focus on these posts and how these were presented and became evocative objects (Turkle, 2007) of mourning.

As noted previously, Edwards states that the digital photograph operates in the same way as a physical one we hold. There is still a deep physicality to our engagement with the digital photograph, as it holds the same visual elements into which we can channel our mourning. As such, the studium and the punctum are here in all of these images. Just as Barthes saw death inscribed within his mother in the photographs of her past, so too Cohen's death is in these images. Once we are aware of an artist's death, the images of them are forever changed. Instead of seeing just Cohen 'the artist' reflected back at us, we are forever struck with the pain of loss, whether acutely felt or in the background of our thinking. Ultimately, these photographs act as memento mori; they exist to highlight what Cohen meant as an artist, and even as a man, but also reflect back what the poster feels about Cohen's death. Death stalks these images. Unlike in the obvious mourning scenes at the shrines of George Michael, death and mourning here are the punctum through which the fans engage with

photographs of Cohen, using them as both mourning aids and as a tool to display emotions outwardly.

There is a continuity in these posts in regard to the Teacher persona and late style, and these are reflected back through the mourner's post. Throughout these posts, Cohen is continually presented as the older version of himself. The late style which permeated the whole of Cohen's career comes to a crescendo in the aftermath of *You Want it Darker*, with the majority of posts highlighting him in a visibly older persona. If we consider Figure 5.3, Cohen sits in his trademark suit with a walking stick, visibly aged and visibly disabled. However, in this image it is not portrayed as a weakness. Rather, he is the older, sage man, the teacher who has lived a long life and is holding court, beckoning the onlooker to take a seat beside him and the cat. Within this image we can see the evocative object of the mourning aid in action. Here is a man who has lived a long life; his aged face and his weathered body are a testament to the late style Teacher persona we discussed before. If Cohen embodied an early late style narrative, then this image is the culmination of that late style into its final incarnation. When juxtaposed with the images of David Bowie and George Michael shared following their deaths, we see that these explicit signs of ageing are absent. In these posts there is a heavy reliance on the late 1980s for Michael and the Aladdin Sane imagery for Bowie, which constitute the majority of their posthumous images. They are seen as forever young men in the prime of their lives. This emphasises how Cohen was in fact considered an older artist by these fans and is solidified in the choice of mourning posts.

If we look at these posts through the lens of Moore's concepts of authenticity, the persona that looks back at us is one embedded in the first person authenticity discussed in the persona section of this chapter. With this in mind, the Cohen of these mourning posts indicates the 'integrity' and honesty which Moore cites as prerequisites for first person authenticity to be achieved. As such, the images of Cohen reflect what the posters thought was his authentic persona in the aftermath of his death. In this however, we have to look at what Moore terms second person authenticity. As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, this is where 'the impression to a listener [is] that that the listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is telling it like it is for them' (Moore, 2002, p. 220). In these posts, fans are finding their own mourning reflected back at them through the images of Cohen's

'authentic' self. Ultimately, this links the two authenticities in the posts of mourning. Cohen's first person authenticity is reflecting and helping to underpin the poster's second person authenticity, as the mourners use the image of Cohen to showcase their own feelings to their community.

The Teacher persona becomes cemented in the public consciousness by these posts. Each image further positions Cohen in the realm of an older, insightful seer and speaker of truths. Here, Cohen's second person authenticity plays an integral role in our understanding of how fans perceived these posts. There is not so much a retrospective narrative here, as with Bowie, but rather a continuation of Cohen's late style narrative that permeated not just his later works but his earlier career. The images being used are reflective not of a revisionist theory of what Cohen came to mean posthumously, but a continuation and solidification of the man he was seen to be whilst alive. The theories of Cohen as both a teacher and a preacher are reinforced by the presentation of the image in Figure 5.4. Here he is not simply the performer, we see in this image something of Sylvie Simmons' observation that he would make a great Rabbi. He wears his uniform of the hat and a suit, whilst also being visibly overcome with seriousness and emotion mid-performance. The absence of colour in this photograph and others, encourages the poster to think they are presenting something that has a perceived timelessness to it. As such, there is an aesthetic link to the late style we see in the other elements that are shown alongside Cohen. The black and white presents Cohen as a man out of time, unaffected by modernity, whilst adding to this the cultural capital that is represented by the deploying of black and white photographs in the usual coloured space of Instagram.

The images of Cohen objectively show the artist we know, however, there is ultimately an understanding throughout our engagement with these posts that Cohen is dead. As Edwards states about the object of the photograph in the modern day, we have to take into account not just the materiality of the photograph as a digital image but also the constructed scene around it. Here, captions, comments, and annotations become an important part of the whole mourning post. Therefore, we must think of these posts not simply as images in isolation, but rather how Edwards described the photograph books of the past. The punctum of this death is not just the image in these posts, such as it was with Barthes and his mother, more so it is the collective experience of the posts themselves.

Here, we must think about the captions and even the incorporation of the use of lyrics, hashtags, and comments. As such, the punctum, the emotional feel of these posts, establishes itself beyond the image of Cohen. With this in mind, we must move away from the photograph as an isolated mourning image and instead consider the experience of looking at it on Instagram through an ideological prism where mourning is always mediated and constructed.

There is an experience here that is unique to the social media world. The casual nature of the engagement with these posts does not sit naturally within the overbearing period of mourning. There is an initial punctum when the user first learns of the death of Cohen through a social media post, or when the mourner first sees an image of Cohen on Instagram in the moments after learning of his death. Therefore, it is integral for the mourner to see an image of a Leonard Cohen they recognise, validating their perception through the posts of others. If we come across socially unacceptable posts that are either mocking Cohen or not reflective of the personas he inhabited to his fans, these become jarring to the mourning process. The punctum rests in images we ourselves want to see of Cohen; if we do not recognise the artist, the punctum becomes ineffective. The images we consider posting are reflective of the emotional punctum we want, or indeed need to see in these photographs. In this they become partly a studium, as the mourners have the expectation that they might encounter them in these spaces.

The punctum and studium move beyond the details of the image and rest also in the words and comments of the overall post. Ultimately, this is the same as Barthes' view of the punctum towards his mother, however, it differs in its encompassing of the whole visual experience. The image of Cohen in death does not exist as an isolated piece, but rather as a collage alongside the captions and extra image elements surrounding the main image. These are all expressions outwards. The continual use of hashtags means that the posters themselves want to actively participate in the conversation surrounding the mourning. Ultimately, they are engaging with an outwards performance of mourning in the space of Instagram, resulting in these posts becoming evocative mourning objects.

Unlike Reddit, Instagram is a site that actively encourages outwards facing presentations of the self. Although comments on the posts are common, they are not immediately apparent and therefore there is a privileging of the initial poster's words. These are carefully

constructed and written, with emphasis placed on what others reading might think of the poster, while also trying to reflect something deeper in the poster themselves. As such, there is a double engagement with these images as mourning aids. They are both reflections outwards but also inwards. Just as with Bowie and the creation of narrative, the construction of these posts centres not on the artist in mourning, but rather the poster. The more creative these responses to mourning are, the more central the poster is. In all of this, Cohen's lyrics became the main conduit through which the posters selected their feelings towards Cohen. However, it is not the lyrics of *You Want it Darker* which permeate the majority of these posts, as we would maybe naturally expect in a retrospective understanding of this album. Rather, there is a heavy reliance on different Cohen songs throughout his career. This is something the next section will consider.

### **5.5. The Words of Mourning**

The persona we see throughout these images places emphasis on Cohen as the Teacher, deep in thought, lost in something that is beyond the spectator. He is the poet, the master, seen both in his image and in the lyrics that fans chose to remediate after his death. Popular music is centred around the use of lyrics as they are an integral part of how the public views and engages with the medium. Simon Frith puts this succinctly in his essay 'Why do songs have words?' (Frith, 1989):

The pleasure of pop is that we can "feel" tunes, perform them, in imagination, for ourselves. In a culture in which few people make music but everyone makes conversation, access to songs is primarily through their words. If music gives lyrics their linguistic vitality, lyrics give songs their social use (p. 93)

This is especially pertinent when we consider Leonard Cohen's position in the popular music canon. He is portrayed as the poet, words and music are both integral in Cohen's work, but the platform vernacular of Reddit makes the mourner privilege the written words of Cohen. As such, this has been reflected in the posts we see in the aftermath of his death. In the first analysis section we considered how the image of Cohen had been presented in line with the

teacher persona he cultivated, linking to the late style he inhabited throughout his career. Within the previous posts, words still hold an integral part of the whole image. They are in the captions, in the comments, and even in the blurring together of the image and the text seen in Figure 5.5. In this section, I am going to consider how these words intersected with images and finally became evocative objects within Instagram. Firstly, I am going to discuss the ways Instagram is a place where words have become images through cultivation of and engagement with Instagram poetry.

### ***5.5.1. Instagram and Poetry***

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the platform of Instagram utilises a one directional presentation of the self, built for the remediation of space, time, and materiality. This restricts the ability to construct an ongoing dialogue between users, meaning the platform acts as a means of presenting outwards, showcasing one user at a time. However, this also acts as a way to curate the user's own experiences, as each user has a unique content flow depending on who they follow. This presentation, mixed with individual curation, results in what Palmer calls the 'emotional archives' (2010, p. 6) of Instagram, where the user creates and maintains their own life narratives in the presence of others. There is a digital materiality to these archives as they showcase the remediated lives of the people who construct them, as considered in the first analysis section of this chapter.

On Instagram, words and images have long intersected through captions and the comments users leave on each post. This has become even more prominent in the last few years through the prevalence and popularity of Instagram poetry. Instagram poetry is considered as poetry stanzas designed to be placed on a single Instagram image where 'the poems are presented to be consumed quickly and simply on a smartphone' (Pâquet, 2019, p. 302). This poetry is designed to be scrolled past and interacted with lightly, it 'is simplistic, little more taxing than reading a meme' (Berens, 2019, p. 299). Perhaps the best known of the 'Instapoets' is the Canadian Rupi Kaur (an example of her work can be seen in Figure 5.6). With over 4.3 million Instagram followers, Kaur has constructed a unique position in the world of both social media fandom and poetry, releasing books of her collected posts and

curating a lifestyle brand around her social media activity and poetry. Her style has become the quintessential Instagram poetry vernacular, established through the posting pattern of 'poetry, selfie, and illustration' (Pâquet, 2019, p. 299). This is repeated throughout the account, with the posting regime never differing from this sequence. The result of this is a cohesive Instagram brand persona which establishes Instagram poetry and its use as an inspirational lifestyle force which underpins its visual vernacular. These are highly curated accounts, where the presentation of the self is given just as much prominence as the poems being showcased. People are ultimately buying into the persona of the poet as much as the poetry being presented.

Lili Pâquet claims that the popularity of Instagram poetry is a direct reaction to social media's failings. These poets 'offer a self-help aesthetic that contrasts with the superficiality of the social networking site' (2019, p. 297). As such, the visual vernacular of these posts is positioned as a respite to the crowded flow of content that is perceived to be somewhat lesser in sincerity and depth than the poetry. However, as we can see through Kaur's work, these posts are merely another facet in the presentation, or representation, of the self in these online spaces. These are linked into the concept of the 'self-help selfie' by Eagar and Dann, characterised by 'flattering images demonstrating self-achievement, often situated within the physical appearance fields of beauty, fashion and exercise, accompanied by a rhetoric function of charting a journey of self-invention.' (Eagar & Dann, 2016, p. 1848). The posting of Instagram poetry allows users to tap into these lifestyle brands and showcase elements of cultural capital that signal themselves to be aware of the superficial nature of Instagram and to be sitting outside of it. We see that the visual vernacular of the Instagram poem is given more weight by being in a written form, representing a turn away from the photograph and towards something generally considered more sincere.

There are obvious parallels between Leonard Cohen's own poetry style and Kaur's. They both use line drawings alongside text, giving a personal edge to the typewritten word. We can see this in Figure 5.7 from Cohen's posthumously released book, *The Flame*. This is mirrored by the mourners on Instagram, as users copy Cohen's own style whilst adding little images of him alongside his words (see Figure 5.8). This may ultimately differ from conventional Instagram poetry, but it certainly falls in the vernacular remit of these poetry posts. There is an emphasis on materiality throughout both these posts and Instagram

poetry. These poems are often ‘presented in posed photographs, where the poem will be typewritten and sometimes still sitting in the typewriter’ (Pâquet, 2019, p. 299) and the materiality of the words themselves are given form by the presence of a remediated physical object. By subverting the perceived vanity of the visual vernacular of the selfie, Instagram poetry itself has become a way to present oneself as cultured, sitting outside of the usual norms of Instagram presentation. However, this has now become a learnt, and even clichéd, form of presentation, one which is now a visual vernacular able to be utilised by Instagram users.

### **5.5.2. *There is a Crack...***

Just as the overriding visual nature of images of Cohen slipped into tropes that were deployed again and again by the users (the black and white aesthetic, the hat, the suit), so too the words presented started to adhere to a similar lexicon of particular phrases. When an artist dies, just as a certain bank of images become the visual language of mourning, so too the words of mourning become phrases that are rebooted and used again and again by different posters. We have already seen this in the David Bowie chapter of this thesis, which highlighted particular points and phrases that stitched together a cohesive narrative of mourning. For Cohen, I am going to concentrate on a couplet from his song ‘Anthem’ released on his 1992 studio album, *The Future*:

There is a crack in everything

That’s how the light gets in (Leonard Cohen, 1992)

In the mourners’ use of these words within the visual realm, they are mirroring the artistic form that Cohen was a proponent of, linking their own feelings and expressions into ones they saw Cohen himself convey. There is a blurring of both the visual and the written mediums in these posts. In this section I am going to discuss how these tableaus became the means through which a new form of mourning manifested itself in the aftermath of Leonard Cohen’s death.

When first considering the posts that predominantly contain words, we are confronted with the blurring of images and text within the creative ways mourners have adapted to the platform vernacular of Instagram. As discussed previously, Instagram poetry, and especially the work of Rupi Kaur has given legitimacy to this form, ultimately complementing the work in Cohen's poetry collections. As such, it would not have been a surprise to the mourners to see these two forms co-existing. In fact, we must consider this a visual language that has transcended Cohen and instead is now a vernacular of Instagram mourning. Culturally, the narrative of Cohen's death was informed by the ways Bowie was considered following his death. Here we do not know that if Cohen died before Bowie, or before the establishment of the platform vernacular of Instagram poetry, that his mourners would not have presented something different in these spaces. However, we must view these posts in the extra-musical sphere in which they were posted, and must consider even the casual observer to be fully cognisant of the visual language and presentation of these posts in the context of social media.

It is impossible to determine where this couplet originated in the immediate mourning of Cohen. Rather, it is clear that it became a shorthand for something which the mourners wished to convey. Let us first consider the phrase and its meaning outside of Cohen's mourning. Posner claims that the phrase links back to Cohen's Jewish roots, as the opening phrase 'There is a crack...':

derives from the Lurianic Kabbalah, from a premise known as the Shevirat HaKeilim, the breaking of the vessels. According to Luria, ten vessels originally contained the emanation of God's light. Too fragile to safely harbour it, they shattered, leaving the world in chaos. Only by a reunion of the male and female principles, a conceit deeply embedded in Cohen's work, can the vessels be repaired. Indeed, it is not impossible to read much of his canon as a de facto exercise in tikkun olam, a reparation of the world (Posner, 2017, p. 513)

Therefore, we can understand the conscious act Cohen was making by including these phrases. He continues to build on the Jewish mystical foundations in his work, leaving trails throughout which hark back to his previous lyrics and the religious and poetic foundations of his career. In this, Cohen's Teacher persona is present, creating a guide to both suffering and overcoming loss. The couplet becomes the means through which mourners are

engaging with the death of Cohen, tying the disparate elements of his death into a cohesive narrative that mirrors the tale of the breaking of objects. Death is a shattering experience, but in this there is also light and love that guides us through our mourning.

Cohen himself stated that the song *Anthem* was ‘one of the best songs he had ever written, maybe the best. Few of Leonard Cohen’s songs contain as much religious symbolism; rarely does he draw from such a wide range of sources’ (Freedman, 2021, p. 94). I would argue that Freedman here is being hyperbolic in his positioning of *Anthem*, although it is certainly true that the song is a means through which Jewish mysticism and the grand scheme of Cohen’s ideologies of faith, sex, and imperfection link together. In an interview, Cohen distils this down through his ideology on life:

The thing [life] is imperfect. And worse, there is a crack in everything that you can put together: physical objects, mental objects, constructions of any kind. But that’s where the light gets in, and that’s where the resurrection is and that’s where the return, that’s where the repentance is. It is with the confrontation, with the brokenness of things (Cohen quoted by Werber, 2016).

Here we are introduced to the idea of objects in their abstract form. ‘There is a crack in everything’ comes to mean a physical or metaphorical object which is shattered, giving the mourners a way to articulate the pain of loss through the words of Cohen himself. He claimed that the phrase is the nearest thing ‘I could describe to a credo’ (Cohen, 2004). Therefore, the ways Cohen situated these words in life allowed mourners to engage with it in his death. By posting the couplet, they were not necessarily acting with full knowledge of the provenance of the phrase and what its connotations were. If we consider the posts themselves in Figure 5.9, we can see that the mourners let the couplet be the focus of their mourning images. Here, the captions are slight and unintrusive to the wider words of the posts, especially when we compare them with posts mentioned previously. We can infer from this that the mourners wanted the words uninterrupted, leaving them to be the emotional punctum through which onlookers, and indeed the mourners, can express their emotions in the place of Instagram.

If we consider the posts in Figure 5.10, we can see the contrasting ways this phrase was utilised throughout the mourning process. When looking at these images it is immediately

clear how little to no relevance some of the imagery has to Cohen, his life, or even the words being presented. This brings into question what is happening within these posts that sit outside of the ‘usual’ expression of mourning through the use of imagery directly relating to Cohen. The ‘Instagram poetry effect’, whereupon users are trying to find something ‘authentic’ that looks beyond the photograph is heavily apparent in these posts. Here, mourners are trying to reflect a level of cultural capital that moves outside of the simple reposting of the image. Rather, the words become surrogates of Cohen, his cultural capital, and therefore, the representation of his self in mourning. Just as there is a punctum in the photographs of Cohen after death, so I would argue there is a punctum, a jarring relation to death, in the words that come to represent him. There is a creativity used here by the mourners, as they divorce Cohen’s words from the man himself, and express them as their own phrases of mourning. However, this is also done within the wider culture of posting about Cohen’s death on Instagram, highlighted through the use of hashtags. We therefore have to see these posts as operating as a reflection of the mourner. Although there is the exclusion of Cohen’s image, mourners are representing Cohen through his words and ultimately showcasing their own mourning via these phrases. The self-help nature of Instagram poetry resides here, allowing users to apply the words and the vernacular of poetry to the words of Cohen used during their mourning. There is a co-authorship here, as the posters use Cohen’s words to both reflect what his death means in the wider cultural society and to express themselves in the moment.

The mourners are actively placing themselves at the centre of mass mourning through these posts. Although the words are used as a punctum to get to the heart of the mourning of Cohen, they are also reflections of what the mourners think of death. Just as with Bowie, there is a collective understanding of what these words mean in the wider field of the social media sites, knitting together desperate narratives of mourning into the emplotment of Cohen’s death. The mythscape of Instagram acts as a way for the second person authenticity of these words to be enacted and presented. Mourners infer that ‘cracks’ are the imperfections of life and ‘the light’ can creep into even the darkest parts of consciousness. Moore’s concept of second person authenticity is within this. Therefore, the continual use of this couplet allows mourners to see their own experiences of mourning reflected back at them through Cohen’s own words. This lets the mourner make sense of

the scattered mourning period, and indeed their own collective and broken thoughts: the cracks where the light gets in.

These posts are evocative objects which become the vessel through which mourners relate and distil their visions of what Cohen meant to them. Within this, the punctum of the couplet becomes the means through which mourners convey their own emotions. They are moved by others' use of it, therefore they use it to move their own audience and distil their own thoughts into an easily recognisable shorthand. Just as Barthes points to the visual punctum that comes along with the image of the artist posthumously, so too Pickering and Keightley link in the auditory punctum that embeds itself in the music we consume (2006, p. 161). These posts sit between the two. Barthes claimed that the written word cannot hold a punctum in the same way that the visual world can, however, these posts become visual evocative objects that are consumed in the same way a photo of Cohen would be. Although they are divorced from the songs they are from, they also come to highlight the fact that the punctum exists in the original material. Ultimately, this underscores that these posts are evocative objects through which the punctum of death can be embedded and consumed.

Instagram poetry becomes pertinent at this point, as mourners move away from the simple, or maybe even deemed 'easy', way to mourn Cohen through his image, to the more reflective, involved, and labour intensive nature of these other posts. The self-help concept placed at the heart of Instagram poetry's use of visual language connects to the wider culture of the platform. The Teacher persona is prevalent throughout this as the couplet is considered the means through which Cohen himself expressed how he wished to be mourned. By illuminating the link between death, life, light, and dark, he left behind words that could be used to both mourn him and celebrate him. This gave fans the chance to consider him the teacher of mourning, stressing that light needs to shine through something that has been broken in the past. Unlike Bowie's retrospective narrative, it is illuminating that Cohen's 1990s track 'Anthem' was seen as representing the true narrative of his passing at this point. I would argue however, that the couplet of 'Anthem' should be considered a meme in the mourning space, whereupon it became a shorthand for mourning with minimal engagement and effort put forth by both the poster and the spectator.

## 5.6. Conclusion: Mourning as a Meme

When we consider the posts of mourning for Leonard Cohen, it is evident how much they have in common with the concept of the meme. The meme has become an integral part of Internet culture, with its definition morphing from its original incarnation in Richard Dawkins' book *The Selfish Gene*, of a system of transmission of data within genes (Dawkins, 1976). In their simplest form, Internet memes are 'a practice of imitation, acting essentially as a unit of cultural transmission' (Andreallo, 2022, p. 24). Limor Shifman fleshes this out by talking specifically about memes in the digital age, stating that Internet memes can be defined as:

looking at diffused units as incorporating several memetic dimensions—namely, several aspects that people may imitate; and understanding memes not as single entities that propagate well, but as groups of content units with common characteristics (Shifman, 2013, p. 39)

Therefore, we can conclude from this that the posts around Cohen's death fit into these definitions. They contain aspects that are imitated across platforms and posts, the continual use of the couplet for instance. They do not act as single entities, but rather as groups of content that share characteristics, for example the features of Cohen's late style photographs. Burgess reinforces this by stating that 'a significant reason for Internet memes' cultural resonance, fame and spreadability is the presence of textual hooks or key signifiers' (Burgess, 2008, p. 105). Here, we see a mirroring of the ways mourners use both the photographs of Cohen and the couplet we have seen in the posts above. The visual signifiers of Cohen's image and the textual hooks of his lyrics represent how his mourning travelled through the concept of the meme within Instagram.

From these definitions we can see an obvious meme quality to both the images of Cohen and the lyrics presented in these posts. These act as a chain of mourning that is added to and then passed along within the social media space. It is a mixture of participatory culture and different levels of storytelling. The lyrics are there as a resource, and the mourner uses their creativity to then sculpt their mourning into something tangible. Just like with the objects of mourning discussed in the chapter on George Michael, these mourners are

adhering to and drawing upon a shared resource of common tropes. The platform vernacular of Instagram allows for the creativity of image sharing in this space, highlighting how the sharing of these images becomes an act of creative mourning by the posters. Therefore, people are drawing from a shared resource but are remaking it through their own image. This is interactive media, interactive mourning, the mourning meme.

The mourner uses these memes to showcase their ideal images of Cohen, through which they can represent not just Cohen's life, but their own mourning. This is brought to its extreme through the negation of Cohen's image entirely. In these posts, mourners are using Cohen's words not just to reflect Cohen but also creatively engaging with their own mourning process. The Teacher persona created the means through which mourners can make sense of their emotions, trusting in the poetic image and language of Cohen to convey their own ideas of his passing. There is a co-authorship here with these posts, as we see reflected in the definitions and discussions of memes. This is an intrinsically Internet phenomenon, as mourners utilise the materials around them to creatively output their mourning emotions and experience. As such, the images posted in the aftermath of Cohen's death are evocative objects which mourners task with representing both their mourning emotions and a cultural capital presentation to fellow users (described as the self-help selfie (Pâquet, 2019, p. 297) within Instagram poetry). In this, mourners are constructing a presentation of the self, focusing their performances both inwards and outwards through the concept of the evocative object and the meme. Images of Cohen, the words that represent him, and the extra image cultural milieu that surrounds these posts, are all used in these spaces as surrogates not just for Cohen's memory but for the memory and emotions of the poster. The image of the mourner resides within this, marking these mourning memes out as representations of the self: as selfies.

Figures 5.1 – 5.10

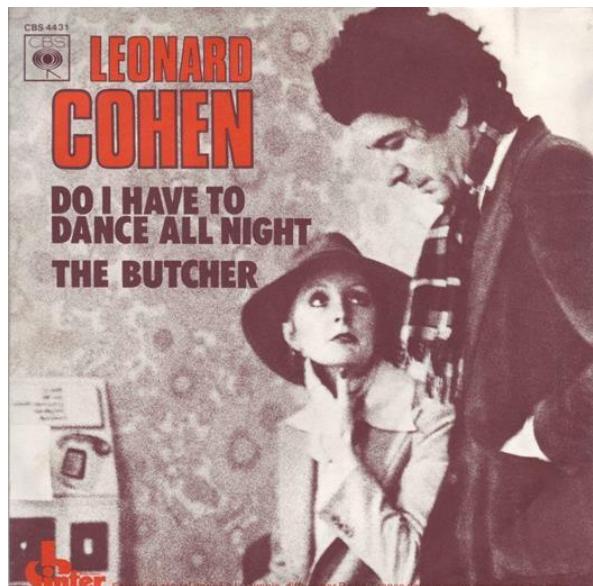
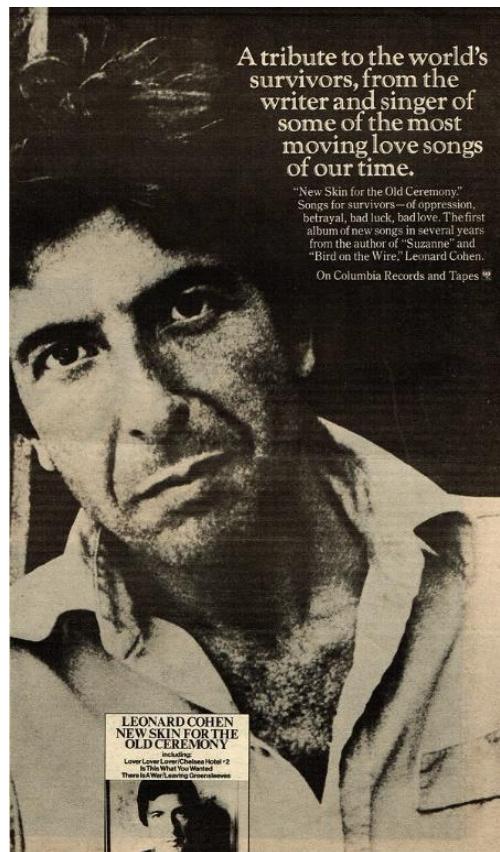


Figure 5.1

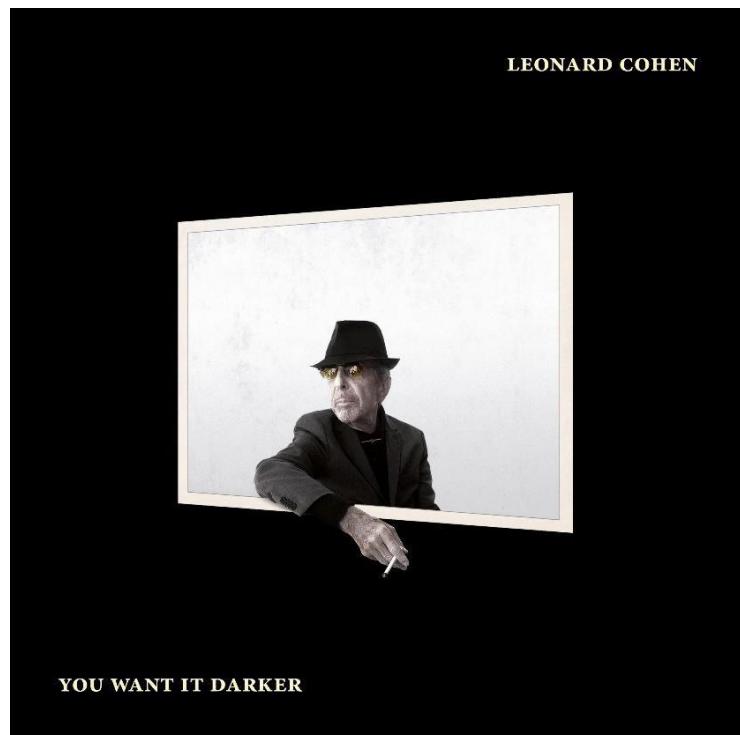


Figure 5.2



Figure 5.3



Figure 5.4



Figure 5.5

i do not need the kind of love  
that is draining  
i want someone  
who energizes me

- rupi kaur

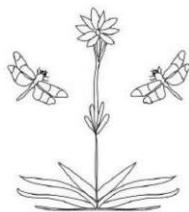


Figure 5.6

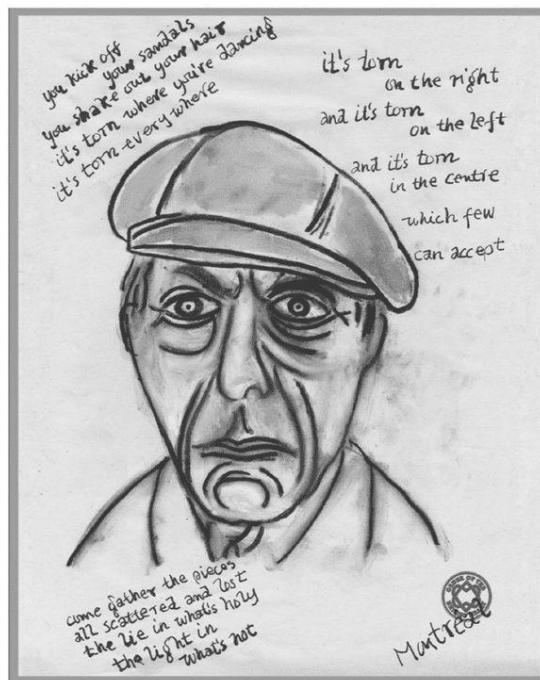


Figure 5.7

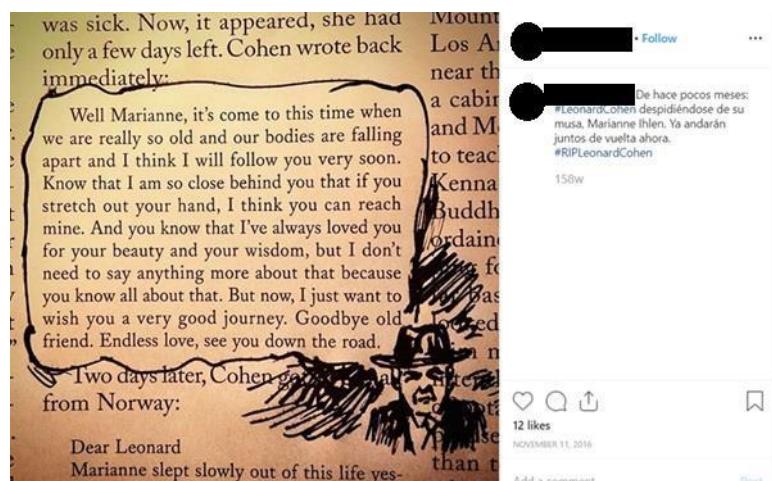


Figure 5.8

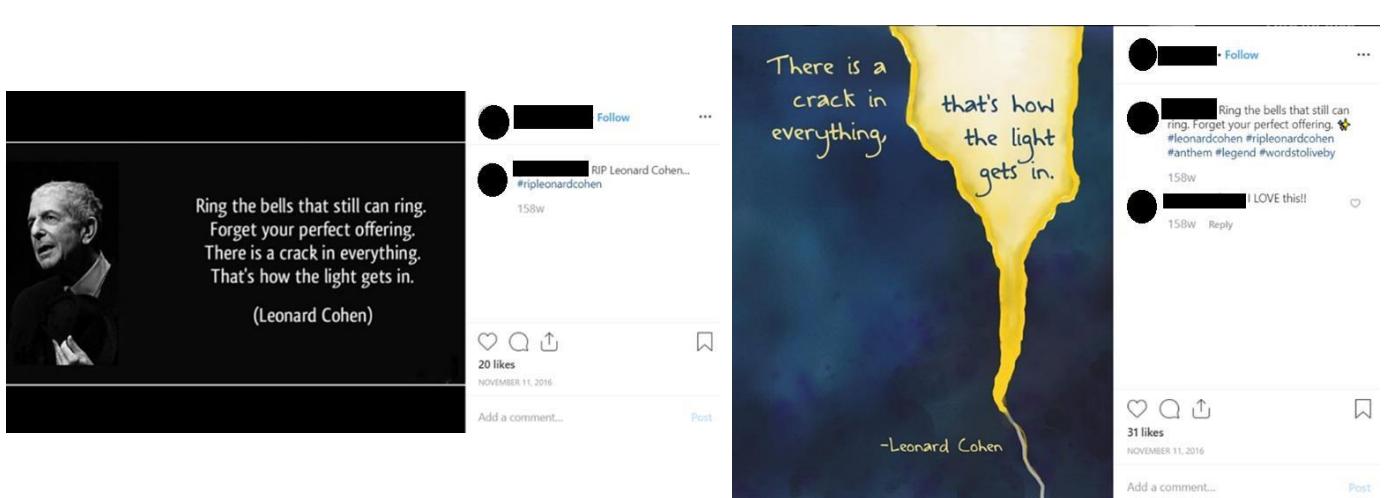


Figure 5.9



Figure 5.10

## Chapter 5. The Self: (Re)Presentation of the Self(ie) in Mourning

### 6.1. Introduction: The Self(ie)

The selfie is usually described as ‘an image of the individual “self” with the specific aim of it being viewed, shared, and consumed on social media’ (Longstaff, 2020, p. 1). It has become the de-facto word of our time, giving rise to individual Internet cultures, popular cultural references, and changing visual cultural tropes throughout the last twenty years. As front facing cameras became ever present in mobile phones, the selfie established itself as the 21<sup>st</sup> century visual cultural language. Selfies have been lauded as being able to showcase communities which had been traditionally overlooked, whilst simultaneously shunned for being a symptom of an individualistic and narcissistic neo-liberal culture (Iqani & Schroeder, 2016; Jerslev and Mortensen, 2016; Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017).

In the following chapter, section 6.2. discusses how the object of the selfie has become an integral element of online communication and by what means this has changed, and been changed, by online visual cultures through the concept of persona. Section 6.3. takes the idea of the selfie and places it into the realm of mourning, and studies how the self is manifested in these practices. This is expanded upon in sections 6.4. and 6.5. which discuss how evocative objects beyond the pictures of the self act as selfies. Finally, sections 6.6. and 6.7. consider how selfies have been used throughout the mourning process of the three artists this thesis has focused upon. I split these into two distinct, yet interlocked, ideas:

- The Mourning Persona Using the Artist
- Overt Displays of Mourning Persona Construction

These two persona categories showcase how the mourner presents themselves in the space of social media mourning. In many ways this is a conclusion chapter to this thesis, highlighting the overall similarities and differences between the mourning of each artist, with the persona of the mourner at the centre.

## 6.2. The Self(ie) As Persona

At its very core the selfie is a presentation of the self. Katrin Tiidenberg sets out that the selfie, as a 21<sup>st</sup> century practice, can be defined as being constructed by:

a photographic object ('a photograph'); a self-representational object ('taken of oneself'); and a digital networked object ('taken with a smartphone and uploaded to social media') (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 19).

These three conditions of a selfie help us locate the practice within the online world. It has been made possible by the development of front-facing camera technology, meaning the user can both be observed and be the one observing through the photographic lens. The self has been at the centre of the photograph since its inception, with some of the earliest examples of photography centring the taker of the photograph within the frame. Art historian Kandice Rawlings asserts that 'from photography's earliest days, there has been a natural tendency for photographers to turn the camera toward themselves' (Rawlings, 2013). Before digital technology, these self-portraits were seen in the same vein as other artistic statements, with artists such as Andy Warhol using the selfie as a method of artistic expression. However, the selfie as a 21<sup>st</sup> century artform has been defined by the ubiquitous nature of mobile technology. Here the artistic merit of the self-portrait is lost in the over-proliferation of selfie images, as the average social media user consumes 100s of these images a week. But with this saturation of self-image comes an omnipresent form of visual communication that informs our online personas, giving users new ways to be in the digital world.

However, we cannot distance the act of the selfie from the cultural connotations of the earlier acts of self-portraiture. Rather, they are a continuation of these initial artforms, rearticulating the presentation of the self through technological advancements instead of being something completely new. Tiidenberg frames this by stating that:

selfies are a new configuration, a moment of coming together, within a process of ongoing technological and cultural shifts in networked, photographic self-

representation. Selfies are new, but not completely – a shift, but not a break in the historical process. (Tiidenberg, 2018, p.18)

Therefore, we cannot think of the 21<sup>st</sup> century selfie as something that is unique to the digital world. Instead, we need to think of the selfie as an act of personal expression made possible by a particular time, technological developments, and networked social media platform vernaculars (as discussed previously in this thesis). With this in mind, the selfie cannot be thought of in isolation of this time period, but as the inevitable end point of our society's shift towards individualism and self-expression, with the help of social media.

### **6.2.1. *The Selfie and its Discontents***

The discontent with the selfie has centred on its perceived manifestation of the neo-liberal capitalist ideology of the 1980s onwards, with the underpinning notion that it is a symptom of an overly narcissistic society. The last 20 years have given rise to a slew of negative articles, books, opinion pieces, and talking heads' 'hot takes.' Alise Tifentale details these takes in her art project *the Selfie: "the Masturbation of Self-Image* (2014), stating that selfies, as a practice and object, have:

been called "a symptom of social media-driven narcissism," a "way to control others' images of us," a "new way not only of representing ourselves to others, but of communicating with one another through images," "the masturbation of self-image" and a "virtual mini-me," what in ancient biology might have been called a "homunculus" – a tiny pre-formed person that would grow into the big self (Tifentale, 2014, p. 5)

Here we can see the main criticisms of the selfie as both a practice and as an object, directed at both the technology that has allowed for this ubiquitousness and the taker of the photograph. However, we see the beginnings of the contradictions at the heart of these criticisms, with Tifentale acknowledging that the selfie can be considered the 'masturbation of self-image' but also a way to communicate with other people through images. With this in mind, it becomes apparent that the selfie exists in a space where it is at once derided, but

also acknowledged as a central, perhaps integral part of our 21<sup>st</sup> century communication networks.

Derek Conrad Murray continues these criticisms of the underlying reasons a user takes and disseminates a selfie. Here Murray links this back to the idea that the selfie taker themselves is doing this for a narcissistic self-pleasure, stating that:

The selfie is so often regarded as a form of narcissism in the Freudian sense: a perversion whereby an individual “treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is usually treated . . . He strokes and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction” (Freud 1991, 3). In its most pessimistic characterization, to take selfies is to stroke and fondle the self in a masturbatory display of self-aggrandizement (Murray, 2015, p.511).

However, the selfie as the masturbation of self-image, or indeed maybe even the self, falls apart when we consider motivations other than taking the selfie for one's pleasure. We do not have these criticisms for the self-portrait a professional photographer produces, or even the proliferation of biography and self-presentation that permeates the artistic world, from art to music and literature and beyond. The reduction of the act to a mere 'narcissistic' impulse negates how producers of the selfie see themselves in the wider culture of social media posting and the reasons they themselves post.

These discontents of the selfie are not lost on the posters and users on these sites, who are aware of the contradictions of the selfie as both a tool for self-expression and one of narcissistic impulses. There is an ironic detachment to the selfie in the social media space as 'only [a] few declare true commitment' (Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017, p.12) to the act of the selfie but 'the combination of...an opportunity for self-presentation without an obvious revelation of self-presentational needs, may also be a part of the secret of their success' (ibid, p. 12). As such, users never fully commit to the discourse of the selfie to protect themselves from accusations of narcissistic self- aggrandisement, however, it is useful to them as a tool to present aspects of themselves. The selfie permits users to form a

lightweight possibility for self-presentation, that allows people to strategically adjust and experiment with the impression they make on others, but still in a playful and somewhat ambiguous manner, that is even interpreted as self-irony (ibid, p. 12).

The users protect themselves from the downsides of the selfie by having an ironic detachment from the act itself, whilst also benefiting from the self-presentational aspect it provides. It is a way for the user to present their constructed self to the world in a low-risk and easily understood, universal way.

P. David Marshall suggests that the selfie is in fact a symptom of the ways the eponymous self operates within what he terms the 'interconnected world' (2015), mirroring Tiidenberg's assertion that selfies are digitally networked objects. Here, the user is at the centre of an 'persistent and insistent push to construct a public persona' (Marshall, 2015, p. 116). Marshall contends that the user is operating within an elaborate form of 'monitoring by both the individual and the intercommunication industry' (*ibid*, p. 116), as the user takes part in the 'monitoring [of] one's persona' (*ibid*, p. 116), deeming this one of the 'essential experience[s] of contemporary life where a constant ritual of editing, writing, connecting, and publicising a public persona defines the sense of self' (*ibid*, p. 116). Previously in this thesis I have demonstrated how the personas of musicians are constructed through the interactions of various stakeholders, including the fan, the press, and the artist themselves. This occurs on a more micro level in these online spaces, with the user constructing their public personas through the platform vernaculars, technology available to them, and the conscious way they want their persona to 'perform' towards their audiences. As such, the selfie exists as not a vehicle for narcissistic 'masturbation,' but an important tool in our collection of ways we can present an online persona to the interconnected world.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century selfie is a learnt practice from the wider cultural landscapes we engage with in our day to day lives. These experiences are informed 'by our immersion in all the images that surround us in the broader visual culture – the billboards, the ads and the magazines' (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 48). We can see this in our engagement with celebrity culture and the proliferation of staged photographs of the self we consume on a daily basis, whether that is via our own friends or the wider celebrity sphere. Alice Marwick states that:

Social media users learn and teach one another canned poses, flattering camera angles, and facial expressions, such as the pursed lips known colloquially as "duckface," which can be seen throughout photo-sharing sites like Facebook and Instagram (Marwick, 2015, p.141).

These learnt behaviours build on the concept of platform vernacular discussed throughout this thesis, with the selfie becoming an online tool for users to both engage with one another and navigate their online worlds.

David. P. Marshall and Kim Barbour bring this into the sphere of celebrity and persona by stating that it is through the ways 'that celebrities present themselves' (2015, p. 9) that we form our own impression of how our mediatised selves are presented within the online realm. The celebrity persona presentation has served 'as a rubric and template for the organisation and production of the online self, which has become at the very least an important component of our presentation of ourselves to the world' (Marshall, 2010, p. 39). We have learnt that in the online world we have the power to mediatise our personas, switching from being a consumer of the mediatised world to a producer. In his updating of Barthes' mythologies into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Peter Conrad centres the selfie within this very dichotomy. He states that the selfie represents the switch from just consuming images, i.e. seeing, to both consuming and producing images: seeing and *being* seen (21<sup>st</sup> Century Mythologies: The Selfie, 2014). As such, as online users we consume and produce content that both constructs our presentation of persona and also perpetuates the visual vernacular of the selfie.

### ***6.2.2. The Motivations of the Selfie***

The preceding criticisms of the selfie concentrate on the actions of the takers, rather than what the selfie comes to represent as an object of persona, either digitally or physically, within the wider world. As discussed previously in this thesis, digital photographs can carry the same complexity as the physical photograph, as we saw through the exploration of the images surrounding Leonard Cohen's death. Although the selfie is shaped within the space of the social media site and the subsequent platform vernaculars that have arisen with this, it too carries the weight of emotion and textual complexities that the physical object of the photograph does. Tiidenberg states that the discourse around selfies considers them to be 'objects' (2018, p. 17). She argues that with this objectification, the selfie 'carries multiple meanings, all collapsed into one entity, and while we might think we all mean the same

thing, when we say “selfies are” or “selfie culture” or “selfie craze,” we probably do not’ (p. 17). As such, the ability to construct the selfie into an object that is transferable across multiple platforms allows for a multitude of meanings to be constructed around them and the practices of taking them. This mirrors the way Marshall states our digital personas are constructed within what he calls the ‘interconnected world,’ with each platform, each opportunity to present a constructed self (a persona) to different audiences.

The reasons someone posts a selfie can be complex and multi-layered, coming from a multitude of different motivations and cultural places. Tiidenberg claims that the ‘meanings people attribute to selfies stem from what people do with selfies, not what selfies are in themselves’ (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 18), as such, we must understand the selfie within the cultural and emotional resonance of the social media site. These manifestations of the selfie ‘experience’ sit within an ecosphere, ‘not as isolated objects, but as posts within an endless flow of posts, other people’s posts, relationships, people, platforms, visual tropes and popular norms’ (ibid, p.47). Ultimately, we have to think of the object of the selfie not as a single piece of narcissistic performance, but as an expression of the platform vernacular and posting culture of these social media sites. This leads us to conclude that selfies:

are a new configuration, a moment of coming together, within a process of ongoing technological and cultural shifts in networked, photographic self-representation.

Selfies are new, but not completely – a shift, but not a break in the historical process (p.18).

Here we see where the act as well as the object of the selfie exists in our understanding of cultures of posting. It is not new, but rather a practice that has been informed and underpinned by technology, rather than fully created by it. This allows us to begin to see that the motivations of the users posting these photographs begin in a space where the selfie is both understood as a vehicle for self-expression and is ubiquitous in the visual languages and tropes it entails.

It is almost impossible to pinpoint the exact reasons someone posts a selfie online, however, considering these posts as formations of an online persona allows us to see the different ways users approach the presentation of the self. These online personas are ‘embedded with strategy and intention’ (Marshall et al., 2015, p. 290), and the persona is

the representation of the self within the world ‘even when entirely composed of digital objects, networked connections, and mediated expressions’ (ibid, p. 290). There exists within these posts both subconscious and conscious levels of presentation that far exceed the users’ true motivations. When deconstructing the motivations for selfies, theorists have pointed out four ways users are motivated to post selfies: ‘attention seeking, communication, archiving, and entertainment’ (Sung et al., 2016, p. 263). Here the persona of the selfie mirrors the persona of the artists discussed previously within this thesis. Instead of just a narcissistic representation of the self, there is a collective negotiation of motivations, platforms, and materials used to present how the user thinks and wants to exist in these online spaces.

These personas are presented to what Marshall terms the ‘micro-public’ of each person’s social media space. The concept of the micro-public, as described by Marshall, is:

a technique to describe the way that collectives form in contemporary culture and the way in which personas are modelled with these kinds of networks in mind. The online micro-public is usually defined in terms of the followers and friends that people have on their social media sites. (Marshall et. Al. 2015, p. 291).

The concept of the micro-public gives shape to our idea of the audience for each social media feed, allowing us to see the spaces in which users ‘perform’, and the imagined, and indeed real publics they are performing towards. It also places the performance of persona at the heart of the online interaction, with Marshall stating that the concept of the micro-public, a new private display network, ‘essentially help[s] us describe how public persona is differently configured and constituted in the twenty-first century’ (ibid, p. 291). This is done through the developed use of ‘presentational media forms such as social media, which rely on the appropriation, remix, remediation and recirculation of already established representational elements’ (ibid, p. 291). Therefore, the micro-public allows for the articulation of where, when, and what the poster uses to present their persona within the space of social media. This highlights how the concept of the persona and the self has been transformed by the introduction of a public whom users position their online interactions, displays, and performances towards.

The online presentation of the self is a performance. Social media allows the user to craft an online persona that is readily available, perceived, and transposed across different platforms and sites. The display of this persona to what Marshall calls our 'micro-publics' allows us to see who users are engaging on their social networking platforms, but the performance of persona is not mono-faceted, rather, it is a complex mix of motivations for the poster. Online personas are a means through which we 'must perform our identity, our profession, our gender, and effectuate our tastes, interests, and networks of connection' (Moore et. al., 2017, p. 4). At the heart of the presentation of the self, the selfie, these situations, or even directions of performance, inform how the selfie taker is presented and exposed to their micro-publics. Here, the concept of the self is muddied by its relationship to persona and presentation, but this:

performative identity does not make claims about the "real", or a self that is somehow less produced or implemented, or more complete in some underlying way. The public performance of the self is neither entirely "real" or entirely "fictional" (ibid, p. 4).

Therefore, although there is a level of artifice in the construction and presentation of the persona online, such as the adoption of a selfie pose, its core is still a reflection of the self.

The selfie sits at the heart of the online persona. Through the blatant presentation of the self, users can dictate the way they are perceived by the outside world. As Moore, Barbour, and Lee points out above, this is neither a truly real nor fake presentation of the self, but rather a product of the mass mediated society of the social media platform. Within this product, however, lies what we can consider to be one of the main motivations of selfie posting: communication (Sung et al., 2016, p. 263). Selfies are some of the most personal things we can post online, they make it 'easy and convenient for individuals to build and maintain relationships within their social networks, both directly through comments on the selfies or indirectly through others' reactions to the selfies' (ibid, p. 263). Communication of the self sits at the heart of the online persona, with users utilising the selfie as a means through which they can display a multitude of information within one image.

One of the most potent reasons users post selfies is the idea of 'archiving' (Sung et al., 2016, p. 263), whereby individuals use these photographs to 'document special events and

occasions in their lives' (p. 263). These practices allow users to post themselves at significant times of their lives, using the power of their online persona construction as not just a presentation but as a personal archive. Social media sites 'offer an ideal platform for hosting one's personal archive in a publicly accessible space' (*ibid*, p. 263), where one can both engage with their loved one's selfies or look back on their own from periods of their lives. As discussed previously within this thesis, this forms these social media spaces into the photobook of the self, a space where someone is just not seeing but *being seen*, by both themselves and others. This advantage underscores the selfie as not just a tool for the presentation for others, but as a tool for the presentation for the self. As such, the selfie can act as a repository through which people can engage with the important periods of their lives, which is strengthened by posting them in the online space where they can be revisited on significant days such as anniversaries.

The archive function of these posts branches out into what Nick Couldry has termed the 'presencing' within online spaces. This is when we use the 'mediated or media-saturated things we do to push information about ourselves into public circulation' (Tiidenberg, 2018, p. 63), it is a way of 'sustaining a public presence in a world that is noisy and information saturated' (*ibid*, p. 63). Here the user is consistently creating a 'steady flow of information about [themselves], so that other people can remember [they] exist' (p. 63). We experience this throughout our online lives, through the urge of posting for the sake of posting, or maybe through the want to update our followers on major life events we are experiencing. This flow of information is part of the persona we develop online, with the self at the centre of this. The presencing of oneself within the online realm links back to archiving, allowing the user to both present their personas within the moment, but also create mediated memories which can be linked back to and engaged with at a later date.

There is an interesting link here between the idea of presencing and the persona. We must think about social media as a third space, where the not quite real and not quite fake interact. Maybe the taker feels they are producing a pure version of themselves in these selfies, but this is a conscious persona that is presented through the lens of mediatisation, even if the user and the audience think this is an authentic self. This is where the link with celebrities enters; we learn from these representations and use the same forms of mediatisation and presentation that were previously only accessible to celebrities. The selfie

allows us to present ourselves within these spaces but what self is there is something we need to consider through persona.

There is a link between these two concepts, with each theorist dancing around, but never quite acknowledging the presence of the other. Tiidenberg distils this link to what she deems the ‘two big human needs’ at the centre of selfie taking: ‘becoming and belonging’ (2018, p. 73). As we have discussed previously, the selfie sits at the heart of the persona construction of the online self, and although Tiidenberg does not use the concept of persona herself, she links the display of the public and the private self online, which I have referred to as persona presentation, to the idea of ‘becoming’ (*ibid*, p. 73). Throughout ‘our lives we are in a constant process of becoming ourselves, both in the sense that makes us unique and the sense that links us to our groups’ (*ibid*, p. 73) with the presentation of persona at the centre of these practices. We as individuals see and are seen in these spaces, the selfie allowing users to see and orientate themselves into becoming what they want to be seen as. Tiidenberg explores this through the concept of ‘becoming’, which she describes as being ‘about all that we gain through our efforts to build and maintain relationships’ (*ibid*, p. 73) with selfies playing ‘their part in this as well’ (*ibid*, p. 73) in the ways we ‘become’ ourselves online. I argue however, that these two concepts can be encompassed into the idea of the persona, and the concept of belonging and becoming are all tied up with the presentation of the self in these online worlds. Our constructed online personas allow us to belong to the groups we engage with in these online worlds, they also allow us to become who we want, opening up the prospects of archiving and presencing. As such, selfies are integral part of our online persona construction, linking disparate past ideas of the self under one banner and creating a resource through which we can engage with our past, present, and future online selves.

### **6.3. Mourning and the Selfie**

If we consider how the selfie is manifested within the world of online mourning we see that something that would seem contentious, even in bad taste, is normalised through the practices learnt in the online world. In their deconstruction, the concepts of archiving and

presencing give us insight into the motivations of persona presentation online. These processes expand to some of the more taboo ideas of when and where we take a selfie. Here we can consider the concept of the ‘funeral selfie’ where the need for archiving memories of the self within the world, come up against ideas of bad taste, appropriateness, and the limits of self-presentation.

Through their work on selfies taken at funerals posted on Instagram, Martin Gibbs, James Meese, Michael Arnold, Bjorn Nansen, and Marcus Carter highlight the ways in which the selfie has come to offer an outlet to mourners in the context of the funeral. In their analysis they found that ‘the most prominent type of photograph labelled #funeral was “individual selfies”’ (2015, p. 260). This branched out into the more abstract notions of the selfie: a photograph taken by someone else but the with subject at the centre of them (*ibid*, p. 260) with the foregrounded subject posting this on their social media channels, in this case Instagram. For the purposes of this analysis, I will also consider these types of photos selfies, despite not being taken by the subject themselves. At first look, these posts seem be at the height of poor taste, as the users privilege themselves and their image over the usual sombre occasion. However, when viewed in context of the cultures of posting which surround these social media sites, we see that the inclusion of something that may seem distasteful is in fact a continuation of the posting of seemingly personal moments in the social media space.

Tiidenberg brings this into focus by stating that the whole selfie taking experience is about building and exploring an identity, asserting that ‘through all these moments of doing selfies we [are] think[ing], exploring and experimenting with our own ways of being a person’ (2018, p. 65). She expands this thinking by stating that ‘selfies are part of our storytelling, outcomes of our creative impulses, means to inform others and rituals for building, entering or sustaining communities’ (*ibid*, p. 70). As such, we can see these funeral selfies as a visual trope which bleeds into the event of the funeral through larger practices of online display. Through the analysis of funeral selfies there ‘seemed to be more about the subject’s self-presentation and self-promotion than an acknowledgement of the solemnity and gravitas of funeral rites’ (Gibbs et. al., 2015, p. 260), placing the mourner at the centre of this expression instead of the deceased.

The abundance of selfies posted from funerals allows us to see how far the practice of self-presentation has integrated into our everyday lives, as well as our extraordinary events. Through these funeral presentations the dead are repositioned ‘back within the flow of everyday life’ (Gibbs et. al., 2015, p. 257) allowing users to both highlight their own personal stories whilst also using the ritualistic and platform vernacular tropes of the social media site. These selfies ‘illustrate the way formal, sacred, and institutionalized rituals commingle with individualized profane, subjective, and sometimes improvised events in the platform vernacular’ (ibid, p. 261). As such, the funeral selfie becomes just another visual trope in the overarching mixture of visual tropes we engage with in these social media spaces. Gibbs and co. bring this back to the idea mentioned previously of ‘presencing,’ as the user draws ‘on recognised tropes in order to reposition their funeral experience among their wider network of friends, and concomitantly, to reposition their wider network in relation to the funeral’ (ibid, p. 262). Ultimately, the selfie becomes the vehicle through which users can develop and tell their story of mourning, using the available platform vernaculars, visual tropes, and technologies, to creatively express and construct their mourning processes.

#### **6.4. Beyond the Picture of the Self**

Throughout this section I have alluded to the areas of the selfie that extend beyond the actual picture of the self. This can be understood when Marshall, discussing the ways in which persona is constructed within the online space, states that the persona is not just about the presentation of the self in obvious ways but can be constructed ‘from printed texts to photos, images, animation, charts and graphs and videos in related, captioned, and edited structures on our social media account sites’ (Marshall, 2015, p. 117). As stated previously, we need to break from the idea of selfies being just the presentation of the self via photography. Persona and the selfie are interchangeable terms at this point, with each referring to the collection of presentational material the user puts forth on social media sites. As such, we must consider the persona of the self on social media as a collective negotiation of not just pictures of the self, but also extra-visual elements which surround all

our interactions in the online sphere. The selfie resides in this. Therefore, we can infer that the selfie must extend beyond the picture of the self.

As I have outlined in Chapter 4 of this thesis, the concept of the meme has become one of the overriding visual vernaculars underpinning our engagement with the online world. We exist in a visual sphere within these social media sites as our engagement, even in text based spaces such as Reddit, is governed through our phone and computer screens within the visual sphere. Considering the presentation of persona as a visual meme allows us to see how the transference of the self occurs in these online spaces. The word 'meme' was first introduced by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1989), derived from the Greek 'mimena' indicting that something has been imitated. Limor Shifman expands on this, stating that 'Internet memes can be described as a practice of imitation, acting essentially as a unit of cultural transmission' (2013, p. 363) from user to user on social media sites. As such, we can understand that the meme and the selfie are linked through the concept of persona, as each are learnt in the space of the social media site and replicated by the users who consume them.

Just as with the selfie, the meme promotes participation in the online world, the 'subject no longer passive in the production and distribution of their image[s],' rather engaging in both the production and the consumption of these images. The link with the selfie and the meme deepens when we flesh out the definition of the meme within the digitally networked world. In this sphere, Shifman defines cultural memes as being '(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics, (b) created with the awareness of each other, (c) circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users' (Shifman, 2014, p. 41). If we take this definition and pair it with those of selfie and persona discussed above, they seem interchangeable. Thus, we can define persona presentation within the digital world as being a meme, as the ways in which we post, engage, and remediate these personas mirrors the behaviour of memes.

Fionna Andreollo places the selfie and the meme in the same visual language which encourages participants' 'creative contributions' (2022, p. 25) within the grand scheme of the posting ecosphere. She continues, stating that these

networked visual practices are (1) meaningful, (2) a gesture, (3) embodied practices with identity and the body, and (4) multimodal visual sensory practices. These four fundamentals of selfies and memes point towards networked visual social practice (ibid, p. 29).

I would argue that this networked visual social practice comes under the banner of persona construction, using Marshall's ideas of presenting the self, allowing us to see that these all contribute to the user's online persona. This returns us to the motivations for posting selfies discussed previously, with Andreallo claiming that these products of the self 'act as gestures in two ways: they gesture ideas as a form of communication with others, and they are both culturally meaningful and significant gestural practices' (ibid, p. 30). We are performing our identity, our persona, using the tools of these gestural practices as they operate in a culturally meaningful and easily consumed way.

The theorists who discuss memes and selfies neglect to link these concepts together in the realm of persona, however, we can see from the previous section that they all come under the umbrella of presentation and engagement with online materials. These are all 'pieces of cultural knowledge that share content, form, or stance and spread digitally through replication and mutation' (Mielczarek, 2020, p.513). These presentation vernaculars replicate and produce 'groups of referential iterations that both evoke one another but also depart from one another through content tinkering and re-contextualisation, adding new layers of meaning with each mutation' (ibid, p. 513). Just as the users learn their presentation of persona from imitation, so too these presentations of the self are reproduced through both imitation and remixing (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Shifman, 2014a). Jonathan Ilan calls this the 'pictorial echo' (2014, p. 2879) of intertextuality, describing how users are weaving in and modifying cultural references and borrowed content through their posting and reposting (Mielczarek, 2020, p. 513). We can take the idea of the pictorial echo and move it into the realm of text. With the presence of 'textual hooks "or key signifiers"' (Burgess, 2008, p. 105), text can become a meme, spreading just as quickly and creatively as images.

## 6.5. Situating the Self in Online Mourning

People's posts on social media are a mix of deliberate conscious persona construction and subconscious learnt behaviours. The selfie, although originally considered to be a photograph of a person, can be understood to underpin all of our actions online. Here we see the convergence of the persona in the online space and the previous conceptions of the selfie as a presentation of the self. As such, we can collapse the term 'selfie' into the wider concept of the persona in the online sphere, with our personas encompassing all of our social presentations within these spaces. With this in mind, the selfie and persona have become interchangeable terms, hence, I am going to only use the term persona going forwards. This will cover all of the ideas of the selfie discussed previously and allow us to branch out into the non-traditional forms of self-presentation such as the meme, the text based post, and engagements with others on these sites.

We have learnt from these encounters on social media networks how to, when to, and what to present to the public at any given moment of our daily lives. The concept of the persona allows us to consider how the self is spread outwards through social media site to social media site as the selfie expands from the initial concept of a direct depiction of one's body or image. It follows that everything posted by someone on a social media site is a reflection of their understanding of what their display of the self is, learnt from others on these sites, and underpinned and governed by the platform vernacular unique to each site. Within this, the selfie as persona sits. It allows us to consider that the archiving, social engagement, identity construction, emotional displays, meme spreading, and any other interaction or engagement on these sites contributes and constructs their personas.

Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted how the artist's personas have been manipulated and maintained by mourners within the online space. However, the persona of the posters is central to the mourning process; it is not simply a by-product of their mourning, but the reason for engaging with mourning in these spaces to begin with. In the following sections I am going to position the persona of the self (the mourner's persona) at the centre of each of the previous conceptions of mourning I have highlighted. This will be done by considering

how narrative, shrines, and images, have been co-opted by the mourner to present their own personas on these social media sites. By doing this, it will be possible to understand not just how artists are mourned on these sites, but how the persona of the mourner is the thread that runs through all of the mourning posts.

#### ***6.5.1. Mourning, the Self, and Persona***

As the previous section has outlined, the persona within the social media sphere is a complex mix of words, engagement, photographs, images, memes, and commentary. At the centre of these presentations, the social media persona creatively engages with the tropes of online materials to showcase the stories of their lives. As discussed previously, the selfie has manifested itself throughout our online lives, even becoming a ritualistic event within the practice of the funeral. As such, when we consider how mourning is linked with persona presentation in these spaces, we see a memefication of online mourning, as the ways in which mourners post and their personas become a visual vernacular in the posthumous online space. If we consider that the online interactions we engage with in these spaces are both conscious and unconscious acts of persona construction of the self, then the digital objects we leave behind whilst mourning are part of this online construction.

In the next section of this chapter, I am going to discuss how the persona of the mourner has been shaped, manifested, and reproduced through the mourning of these artists. I have highlighted two distinct yet interlocked ways in which the persona of the mourner has been used throughout the mourning process of the three artists this thesis focuses upon. These are:

- The Shroud of the Artist's Persona
- Overt Displays of Mourning Persona Construction

It is self-evident that the thousands of posts which accumulate after the death of artists are not exclusive to these categories, however, they operate as broad categories that help to locate the persona of the mourner at the centre of these displays.

Throughout this thesis I have concentrated on different aspects of the mourning experience within the online world. It is worth stating that within these experiences there is not a complete or homogeneous group of people that move in unison and experience mourning in the exact same manner. The persona of the mourner is an individual expression that can point towards trends in mourning, not a complete and unabridged reflection of all of mourning in these spaces. Ultimately, the two aspects I have highlighted above act as a means through which the individual persona can add to the online discourses of mourning, and indeed how the mourner centres their own identity into the mourning process. The shroud of the artist's persona focuses on the ways in which posters centre the artist in expressions of their own mourning,. Whether that is the links the artist had with their development as a person, or how the artist helped create their sexual, cultural, or artistic identity. The overt displays of mourning persona construction highlight the obvious insertion of the self within the visual and textual objects posted on these sites, with emphasis on the poster's experience, cultural capital, or exclusive relationship with the deceased.

## **6.6. The Shroud of the Artist's Persona**

As I have highlighted throughout this thesis, when we consider what is posted in the aftermath of an artist's death, we are engaging with both the artist's constructed persona and the persona of the mourner. However, these discussions often privilege the artist, with the mourner acting as a conduit to reinstate concepts from the artist's personas. We saw this most starkly with the overwhelming discourse on David Bowie and how the late style narrative came to underline his passing. In this section, I am going to consider how the persona of the mourner is central to these posts as users adopt the shroud of the artist's persona to produce their own self in these spaces. I will first look at how image tropes of the artist allowed mourners to present pictures of themselves as mourning objects, highlighting visual memes to produce something which references the artist but negates their image. I will then widen further to consider the text based responses where users utilised the artist's

persona to construct their own mourning persona through therapeutic engagement with narratives and non-visual memes.

Throughout this thesis I have highlighted how the image of the artist becomes integral to their mourning on image-focused social media sites. For instance, the stoic black and white images of Cohen gave heed to the teacher persona and reinstated the image of Cohen which the mourners were trying to cultivate. As such, discussions around the images mourners posted on Instagram feels like a natural place to start this section. Each artist offers a unique way for the mourner to appropriate the images which defined their personas; for instance, an artist like Bowie is represented in these posts by the sign of the lightning bolt. Whilst someone like Leonard Cohen does not have the same immediate sign recognition, posters signify their mourning in different ways, particularly through the placing of objects such as vinyl or Cohen's books. The ways the concept of objects has been applied and considered in the previous chapter of this thesis will be seen throughout the posts considered below.

If we reflect on the posts highlighted in Figure 6.1, we can see how mourners appropriated the signs of the artist to 'dress' themselves in the death masks of the deceased. André Bazin, in their essay *The Ontology of the Photographic Image*, links photography to the idea of the death mask as another type of photographic preservation, as a 'practice of embalming the death' (Bazin, 1960, p. 4). Here, we see a mirroring of Barthes' ideas of the photographic image as both a memory aid and a foreshadowing of death, turning the sitter into the object of the photograph. The sign that displaces the artist in these images is embedded into this process, in both the persona of the artist through the sign or death mask and the persona of the mourner through their appearance. Mourners are *becoming* Bowie through the sign of the lightning bolt, whilst also showcasing how tightly their persona was aligned with his through the labour of their fandom. To the outside observer the lightning bolt acts as the punctum to the studium of the mourner's photograph. Here, the mourner is presenting themselves as a facsimile of the artist, processing their mourning through the display of the artists persona whilst also displaying their self. Ultimately, this is a form of mourning therapy *through* the artist's image, with the symbol of the artist providing a link back to their persona but also allowing the mourner to showcase their own mourning persona.

The creativity of the mourner is a strong thread throughout this thesis, as they engage with the signs of the artist and rearrange them within creative acts. Here we can return to Anthony Elliott's work on John Lennon in which he links loss to creativity as a means through which we engage with our identity and emotions:

the individual establishes a relation to the self and other people through loss: the loss of loved ones, the loss of selves, the loss of pasts... I mean to stress that people create themselves through forgetting and remembering their losses (Elliott, 1998, p. 46)

We can infer from this that the persona of the self, or in this case the mourning persona, is established as a product of the loss and the subsequent creativity which it sparks. The use of dressing up as the artist is a creative action, the mourner acts out the loss they are feeling and presents this as a formation of the self. As such, the mourning persona is constructed through these creative engagements with the cultural objects left behind by the artist. The image of the artist becomes a therapeutic signifier for the mourner to present and then express their emotions towards and through. This means that the mourner utilises the pre-constructed persona of the artist in these spaces and builds upon it to enhance their own. Here, the mourning persona is therefore a presentation of the self that is built upon the artist's, but stands distinct from it, with the centring of the self, the mourner, as its main focus. The mourner draws upon the cultural milieu of the artist, using the remnants of the artist's visual persona in this space to connect with, remodel, and reframe their own persona through their selfie presentations. The parasocial mourning that occurs in these spaces is fed through these presentations. They are a means through which fans can interact with the one-sided nature of the relationship with the artist.

#### ***6.6.1. The Creativity of the Mourning Persona***

It is interesting to note the juxtaposition of the sombre nature of these posts against the lighter nature of a photo clearly taken previously at a fancy dress party. We see this mostly in the posts concerning Bowie and George Michael, as shown in Figure 6.1, though images

associated with Leonard Cohen lean more overtly towards creative acts such as drawing, shown in Figure 6.2. There is a seemingly unannounced hierarchy of mourning in these posts, with the ‘popular music’ focused artists embraced in more outwardly distasteful posts (wearing of the death mask for instance) whilst Cohen is more often seen within acts traditionally associated with high art. As I highlighted in the previous Cohen chapter, this mourning parallels the Instagram poetry effect of Instagram’s platform vernacular, the mixture of selfie, meme, drawing, and words coming to reflect the self in these spaces. This is a learnt behaviour of emotional archiving, as the drawings of the artist become an act of selfie presentation through the emotional and physical labour of the fan. With this, the persona presentation of the mourner is one that uses the image of the artist to showcase their commitment to them, highlighting the self through the signifiers of the artist. The learnt visual platform vernacular of Instagram becomes the means through which users showcase their mourning, understood and consumed within the wider social media sphere.

These depictions of the artist are selfies. They are visual evocative objects that place the mourner’s labour at the heart of their mourning process. As Anthony Elliott has pointed out, creativity is bred from loss, and the mourner looks to place their mourning energy into something creative whilst also showcasing their commitment, labour, and fandom to their wider micro-publics. As such, images of the artists in these spaces are actually selfies of the mourner, with the Instagram platform vernacular allowing for a mourning performance of persona through the user’s feed. Here, we can see the act of ‘presencing,’ as users engage with and highlight their involvement in the event of the artist’s death. Intrinsically, these posts act as selfies within these spaces, communicating the self and presenting a personal emotional archive through visual evocative objects. These are visual evocative objects of the self, representing the mourner’s view of both the artist and themselves, highlighting the aspects of the artist that most appeals to them whilst placing either their body or their labour at the centre of the image.

We can draw a line from the idea of the evocative object of the self to the meme in these spaces. These images act as creative products to be added to and engaged with in the same way as memes in the social media space. The signifiers of the artist such as David Bowie’s lightning bolt, George Michael’s faith costume, or a drawing of Leonard Cohen are creative participations within the social media space. Mourners are no longer passive consumers of

the artist's persona in these sites, but are instead actively using the available cultural products to produce and present their own personas in the mourning process, similar to the process of memes. Ultimately, the selfies with the artist signifier and drawings of the artist exist in the continuity of the mourner's feed. As with the work in regard to Instagram poetry, we see not a separation from the poster's usual behaviours, but a continuity of persona throughout one's feed.

For instance, the users who posted drawings of the artists did so in a thread of other drawings and selfies, with the mourning post taking place within a flow of their usual posts. This highlights how unremarkable some of these posts are, or indeed how the user thinks of them as just a factor within their usual persona construction. The seemingly continuous flow of the grid gives us insight into how these posts can be seen as a learnt behaviour of persona construction, as mourners grapple with both the spontaneity of posting and the expectations of persona continuity. Ultimately these visual evocative objects are an integral part of the persona construction, as they centre the self in the mourning process with minimal disruption to their overall content flow, whilst also borrowing the visual and cultural capital signs of the artist's persona. These are all learnt creative practices and impulses from the space of mourning, expressed through the platform vernacular of the site. As such, when we consider the same concepts within the space of Reddit, we see similarities in the display of the self and differences in the way users produce their mourning persona. The mourning persona is a mosaic, a patchwork containing both the cultural objects of the artist and the persona construction of the mourner.

#### ***6.6.2. The Mourning Persona and Words***

The images discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 showed the mourning of the artist through the interpretation and assimilation of cultural signs and signifiers. The mourner creatively engages with the cultural milieu left in the artist's persona and remodels these through their own selfie presentations. This is easier to see in the visual evocative image space of Instagram, but rather less obvious when we turn to the text based site of Reddit. Here, as I have highlighted previously, the narratives of mourning are interwoven with the persona of

the artist as users recast and reinterpret the death narrative. I would argue however, these narrative constructions act the same as they do with images, with the user accessing the cultural signifiers of the artist's persona in similar ways as they do on the image based sites. Ultimately, the narratives shared in these spaces become not just vessels through which the artist's persona is constructed as we saw in section 3.8. through Bowie's late style, but also a place where the persona of the mourner is presented and engaged with.

The late style persona that arose with the death of Bowie, discussed in section 3.6., showed a type of 'deathstyle' to his audience. This was an articulation, in words, of how the users on these sites wanted to understand how Bowie had died and the creative acts that underscored the Blackstar persona. We can understand this further when we link this to Leonard Cohen, the manifestations of Instagram poetry, and how the self-help aesthetic is remediated within social media spaces. Unlike the cultural capital divides we saw in the images remediated on Instagram, all three of the artists' Reddit engagements were similar in their approach to the display of emotions:

I never see it coming when it's someone I have confided so much of my time and pain in, looking to feel better – David Bowie (r/music, 2016a)

My mum passed away earlier this year and this was the song she chose for her funeral. Hearing this news today is just heartbreaking [sic] – Leonard Cohen (r/music, 2016b)

When I was a little girl in the 80s, I had Wham! Posters plastered all over my bedroom wall. I loved Wham! and George Michael solo. I sat there literally in tears while my daughter told me it'd be ok. – George Michael (r/news, 2016).

The dedicated space of mourning gives the users permission to present their emotional selves to the rest of the public. As such, the artist's passing allows the mourner to tap into different emotional states that they wish to perform to the public, in a sense presenting their mourning selfies. These selfies are facilitated by the platform vernacular of Reddit, which operates as a mourning archive for the users.

The persona of the self in these spaces can be understood through the concept of the self-help aesthetic. The 'self-help aesthetic' is described in Chapter 4 of this thesis as a social

media trope which posters use to contrast with the seemingly ‘superficiality of the social networking site’ (Pâquet, 2019, p. 297). The mourners utilise the posts of others to understand that they can look beyond the initial ‘shallow’ ideas that social media has been cast as producing. Within this the disenfranchised mourning that was once part of the parasocial interactions these fans were consuming, is validated by others within this space. This produces an archive of feelings. They are expressions of trauma, loss, and autobiography with the self at the heart of this. The self-help aesthetic analogy allows us to consider that all of these posts as selfies of emotion, with the users embracing the validation of the space as an emotional archive to consume and produce their mourning, through the artist.

### **6.7. Overt Displays of Mourning Persona Construction**

The second mourning persona I am going to consider is the overt displays of personal persona construction we see on these sites. As mentioned above, I argue that this mourning persona consists of all the ways that mourners act in the obvious construction of their online personas. We can see this through users bragging, highlighting first person authentic stories, or by gatekeeping other’s mourning practices. Within this next section I am going to look at all three of the artists I have considered so far in this thesis, and posts on both Reddit and Instagram. This will be done by first considering how posts on Reddit allowed and facilitated a place where mourners can centre themselves in the mourning. This will then branch out to the visual elements we see on Instagram, and the insertion of the self within the visual mourning posts, further cementing the idea that mourning is both a meme and a selfie. Firstly, I am going to consider how Reddit allows for the overt display and construction of the mourning persona.

In the David Bowie chapter of this thesis, I highlighted how the presentation of the Blackstar persona allows mourners to see David Bowie as master of his own death, turning the event into a staged creative act. However, by considering where the persona of the mourner sits within these narratives, we see beyond the initial construction of Bowie as the late style Blackstar. We see a mirroring of the teacher persona in some of these posts, with posters

highlighting how David Bowie had ‘taught’ the mourners several things about themselves: ‘He taught me that coolness is not something you chase, its [sic] something that lives in everyone if we are willing to accept it’ (r/music, 2016a). Here we see both a continuation of Cohen’s teacher persona and what Marshall described as the celebrity providing a template for the construction of persona within the online world. The space of Reddit becomes a place which offers a chance to reform and reinstate your persona in the shadow of Bowie’s, but not necessarily completely informed by him. For instance, the vagueness of the above post highlights that although the narrative of Bowie’s passing was seen as the Blackstar in this space, users often focussed their posts on their own ideas of Bowie’s past or their own conception of what Bowie meant to them.

As discussed in section 3.3.1. and section 3.9. of this thesis, the space of Reddit as a mythscape is built within these posts. However, within this space users are not just formulating the artist’s persona, as presented in Chapter 2, they also use the mythscape to construct their own personas. Thus, the mythscape is built and maintained by the ways in which mourners centre themselves within the myths they are perpetuating. This is at a more micro-level than the overarching persona of the Blackstar, but these posts correspond with Marshall’s concept of the micro-public and how the mourner sees themselves as a part of the overall mythscape formation.

One of the most prominent ways the mourner positions themselves within the narrative is something I am terming ‘persona exceptionalism’. I am defining persona exceptionalism as a distinct marriage between the persona of the artist and the one of the mourner, with the mourner concentrating on the uniqueness of the artist to explain their presence in the mourning space and defining themselves as such. We see this throughout all three of our case studies, as the artist’s unique persona is cited as the reason why the mourner cares and wishes to pay tribute. Here we see what I have been terming the overt persona construction of the mourner, with the mourner positioning themselves at the centre of why they even care about the artist. There is an element of cultural capital within these posts, their *raison d’être* being how different they are to the average mourner. This is present in all of these three examples:

I don't cry over the deaths of celebrities/artists often. In fact it's only happened twice before. But for Bowie it happened. (r/music, 2016a)

This has hit me so incredibly hard this morning. I have never had a reaction like this to a celebrity's death before, and it's really taken me by surprise. I cannot stop crying. I feel like a small part of me is gone, the part that grew up with Leonard Cohen's music, that feels his music. I can still feel it, but it's different, it's a memory instead of something present and happening. (r/music, 2016b).

I don't cry much over celebrities dying, but this one hit me hard. Such a beautiful man, with such a beautiful soul. I'll miss that smile. (r/news, 2016).

It stands to reason that it is not the unique persona of the artist we see in these exchanges, but rather the persona of the mourner stating that the uniqueness of their position has been compromised by the feelings they have towards the artists. I would argue that this has become a meme throughout the mourning of celebrities, in that it has become an interchangeable trope through which each artist and mourner adds something different to the conversation. However, at the centre of all of this is the mourner's belief that they are the exception to the rule that when a celebrity dies we must mass mourn.

In the examples above we can even see the remarkably similar way George Michael was treated in this aspect of mourning, despite the other ways in which he was treated radically differently in these spaces. This reinforces the argument that these posts are not in fact about the artist at all but rather a semi-justification being presented by the mourner that although they are mourning this one time, they are above this usual practice. We can see that within this act there is a selfie element permeating these posts, with the mourner engaging in the ironic detachment of the selfie presentation discussed above (Diefenbach & Christoforakos, 2017, p.12). This at its very simplest is a cultural capital display of persona, with the user reinforcing their exceptionalism and trying to stand above, or even aside, from the perceived parasocial relationship that others may experience on these sites. This is where the overt displays of persona construction, as I have termed it, reside, with the mourner consciously presenting themselves as a mourner for *this* artist, whilst also presenting this act as an exception towards the micro-publics of Reddit.

As I have discussed throughout this thesis, persona is closely aligned with the concept of authenticity. This is a thread that runs through the overt persona construction of the mourners on these spaces, with the authenticity of emotion being at the centre of why

these posts are produced. If we go back to Moore's concepts of authenticity discussed previously throughout this work, we see that these persona constructions are most closely aligned with the second-person authenticity, described by Moore as being 'the impression to a listener that that listener's experience of life is being validated, that the music is telling it like it is for them' (Moore, 2002, p.220). The unique facets of each artist allows the mourner to think that these are the exceptions for them, in this moment and that no-one else could do this to them. These exceptions prove the rule that the mourner is using their immediate responses to the death of the artist to in fact shine the spotlight on themselves. The examples noted above show this in its starker sense, as power is given to the artist to make the mourner feel, but there is also a privileging of the mourner's own exceptionalism for having *felt*. The mourner is seeing themselves as the exception to the rules of online discourse, this carries on when we consider the photographic elements of Instagram and the power of the photograph to display and produce the mourner's persona.

### **6.7.1. *Images and Overt Persona Construction***

As discussed in both the George Michael and Leonard Cohen chapters of this thesis, images provide a visual catharsis to the mourning process as images of the mourner, the artist, and objects become conduits of emotions and persona. Unlike the posts we saw on Reddit, the exceptionalism meme is not as prevalent in the posts we see on Instagram. Rather, we see that the mythscape of Reddit can, and is, transferred to the platform of Instagram with posters producing images to underline their own personas throughout their mourning of these artists. In this section I am going to consider how these posts, from selfies in front of shrines to the more abstract memes, are in fact not a presentation of the artist but rather an overt display of the self, with the mourner sitting at the focal point of the camera and taken with their own persona and micro-publics in mind.

Erika Doss points to the site of mourning as being a mixture of 'ephemerality and performativity' (Doss, 2006, p. 160), something we saw throughout the chapter on George Michael and the site of mourning. In all three of the artist case studies we can see the situating of a performance within the presenting of the self, most notably in the positioning

of the self, or indeed selfie, in the centre of the photograph of the site of mourning as we can see in Figure 6.3. This mirrors the overt persona construction in terms of how the self is at the centre of their engagement with the dead artist, with both resulting in the artist being pushed towards the background. As discussed previously, one of the main facets of the selfie is in the idea that it produces a type of presence for the user to post on their social media sites. The selfie at the shrine is the ultimate symbol of presence and care of the artist, with the user projecting outwards towards their micro-publics showcasing their fandom and embodying a cultural capital distinct from other mourners.

When we look at these photographs through the lens of the studium and punctum, we have to consider that the artist is conspicuous by their absence. The studium is the fact that this is a photograph of the poster, a selfie, whilst the punctum is when you realise where and when these people are, in the middle of a shrine to death. This is starker in the pictures where it is a selfie with the person at the centre of it with an obvious first person angle, this is where the studium and punctum are at their most distant with the emotional core of the photograph almost lost to the casual observer. These images are more about the certificate of presence, of showcasing a mourning persona that not only posts about the artist but makes effort to go and integrate with other fans within the sites associated with the artist. We can infer by the way these photographs are staged however, that this is still a solo act of mourning. Although the mourner is clearly seen within the site of mourning, the shrine, they are usually alone, and not photographed with anything else except the objects of mourning which surround them. This is interesting in two aspects, one being the selfie nature of the photograph but also the absence of an obvious presence of the artist, with the artist being embodied by both the objects which surround the mourner and by the specific site of mourning they are in.

The images we see here are fully staged performances of a mourning persona. As the mourner overtly embraces the surroundings of the shrine to perform their mourning in something of a more traditional way than perhaps a selfie outside of someone's house can be seen to be. This mirrors the exception meme in the respect that the mourner wishes to be seen as going above and beyond for that particular artist at that particular time. We can see that within this the studium and the punctum are more closely located to each other as it is immediately obvious where and what the mourner is doing. This is an interesting visual

meme in these sites as the performance of the mourning persona still concentrates on the solo act of mourning by the artist, but also remediates the site of mourning for observers to engage with in a more traditional way than the first hand picture of the self manages to convey. We can see this in Figure 6.4 with the mourner clearly seen as performing their object laying at the shrine of the artist, embodying a traditional form of mourning that would be immediately and easily recognised by the consuming audience.

These photographs act in multiple ways on the social media sites of the mourner. They are memory aids, into which both the posters and the observers can engage with the site of mourning, allowing immediate physical presence to be flattened. They also inform and underpin the archive of feelings that the mourner is presenting through their posts whilst also performing mourning in a way that is easily digested by the observer. All of these images are performances of some kind, whether that is highlighting how you were actually in this space, through the selfie, or performing a particular (e.g. Western) conception of what a mourner is at these shrines, as we can see in Figure 6.4. The mourner persona is constructed within these spaces, as the image is presented as the true self at the moment of mourning. With this in mind, it is important to see that all of these posts, whether they are text based like the exceptionalism meme or a visual record of presence, are products of both a conscious and unconscious process to showcase the user's own persona within the moment of mourning.

Throughout the overt persona construction ideas I have set forth runs the concept of the unthought known (1987). As I have argued previously in this thesis, the unthought known allows us to consider why mourners use certain types of objects, visuals, and tropes throughout their mourning period. We can see that these ways of overt persona construction are a learnt process of the mourning period on social media sites. We can link in Marshall's idea of the learnt behaviours of persona online through celebrities and widen this out to our own social networks. The mourner mirrors what they see online and learn through the posts of others what is and not acceptable in the aftermath of death. The exceptionalism meme, the selfie at the shrine, and the performed object placement, all act as unthought knowns to the mourner, with the mourner wanting to both connect to the artist and also perform through their own persona presentation. As such, all learnt behaviours of persona construction can be seen through the idea of the unthought known.

These posts are all tinged by the unthought known, which ultimately governs how we react when faced with the death of one of our favourite artists.

### **6.8. The Conclusion: The Self as Mourning Personas**

The mourning persona is a type of selfie. It exists in the sphere of personal presentation within the online world. Social media offers the space for the presentation, exploration, and the consumption of personas. These spaces have provided a way for mourners to connect with one another, explore their own personas, and to remodel the artist's persona themselves. The two types of mourning persona I outlined above are not mutually exclusive and there is an argument to state that all of these posts are an act of overt persona construction. However, the space of social media also offers mourners the chance to produce and present their emotions to like-minded people. Within this there is a purposeful construction of persona, with mourners using objects, narratives, selfies, and other elements to mourn with. All of these posts are therefore both an act of selfie and a meme. The elements we present online are a deliberate act to construct the self and with it our own emotions.

The idea of the self-help aesthetic allows us to see where this sits within the field of social media literature and theory. Posters act in ways to showcase their emotional complexity and cultural capital. They are using the social media space two-fold: to see and be seen. There is not a connection with the dead in these acts, no real need, want, or effort to address the deceased directly, instead these posts are ones which are addressed to the mourner themselves or the people observing them.

These selfies offer a chance to engage with your emotions. As I have repeatedly stated throughout this thesis, social media is governed by a set of unwritten and cultural norms. I argue that these posts in fact show us that these spaces are an integral avenue through which users can open up and engage with the emotions that arise with loss. Within this act it is no longer about the artist, or to some extent the parasocial relationship the user had with them, but rather about the social sanctioned space acting as a presentational platform

for the persona. It is impossible, and unwise, to consider social media as one space that is consumed and governed by the same rules. However, we can infer that the concept of the selfie acts as a bridge between disparate ideas of the image, the written word, and the creative act. As such, if mourning is a creative act, then all of these posts are too. They are expressions of the emotional disturbances that arise within mourning and offer solace through the participation and engagement with others in these spaces. Some may have put more effort into these creative acts than others, but that does not mean that they are any less of a valuable contribution to the wider emotional archives. Mourners are consequently constructing and presenting a part of themselves within these posts, they are producing a selfie.

## Figures 6.1 – 6.4

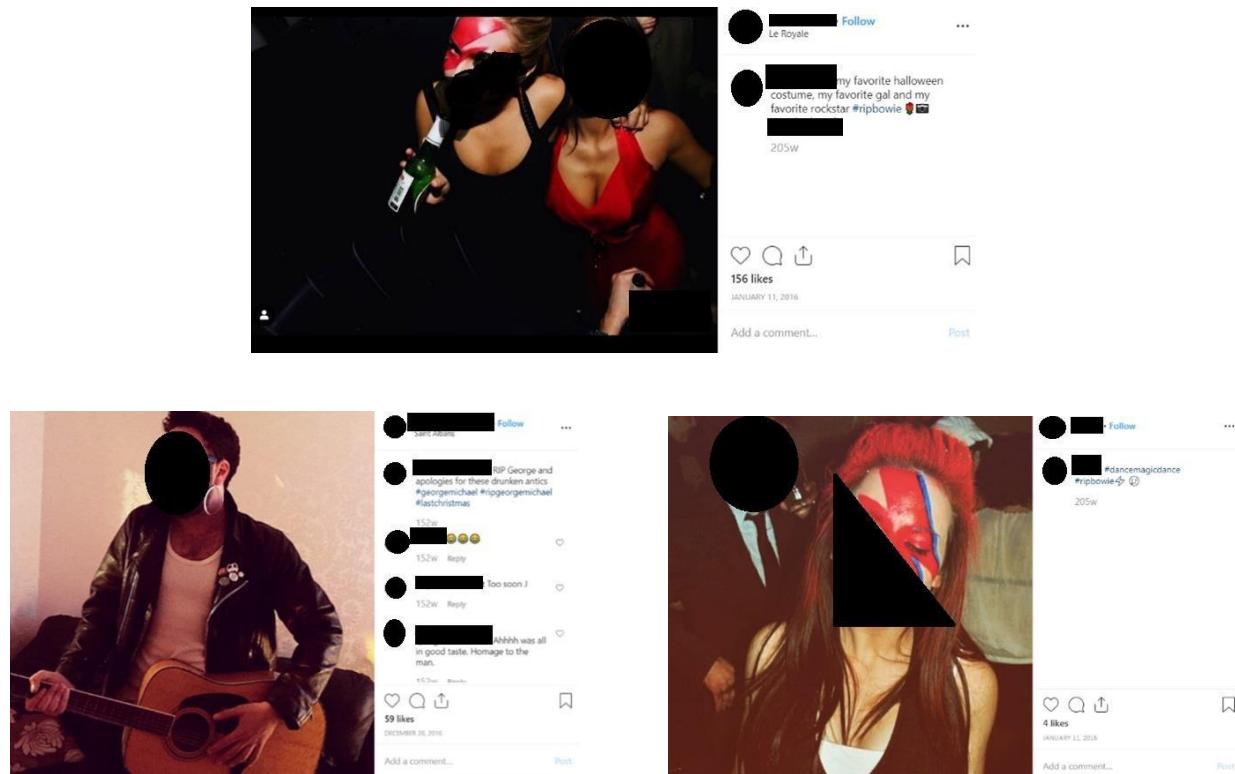


Figure 6.1



Figure 6.2



Figure 6.3

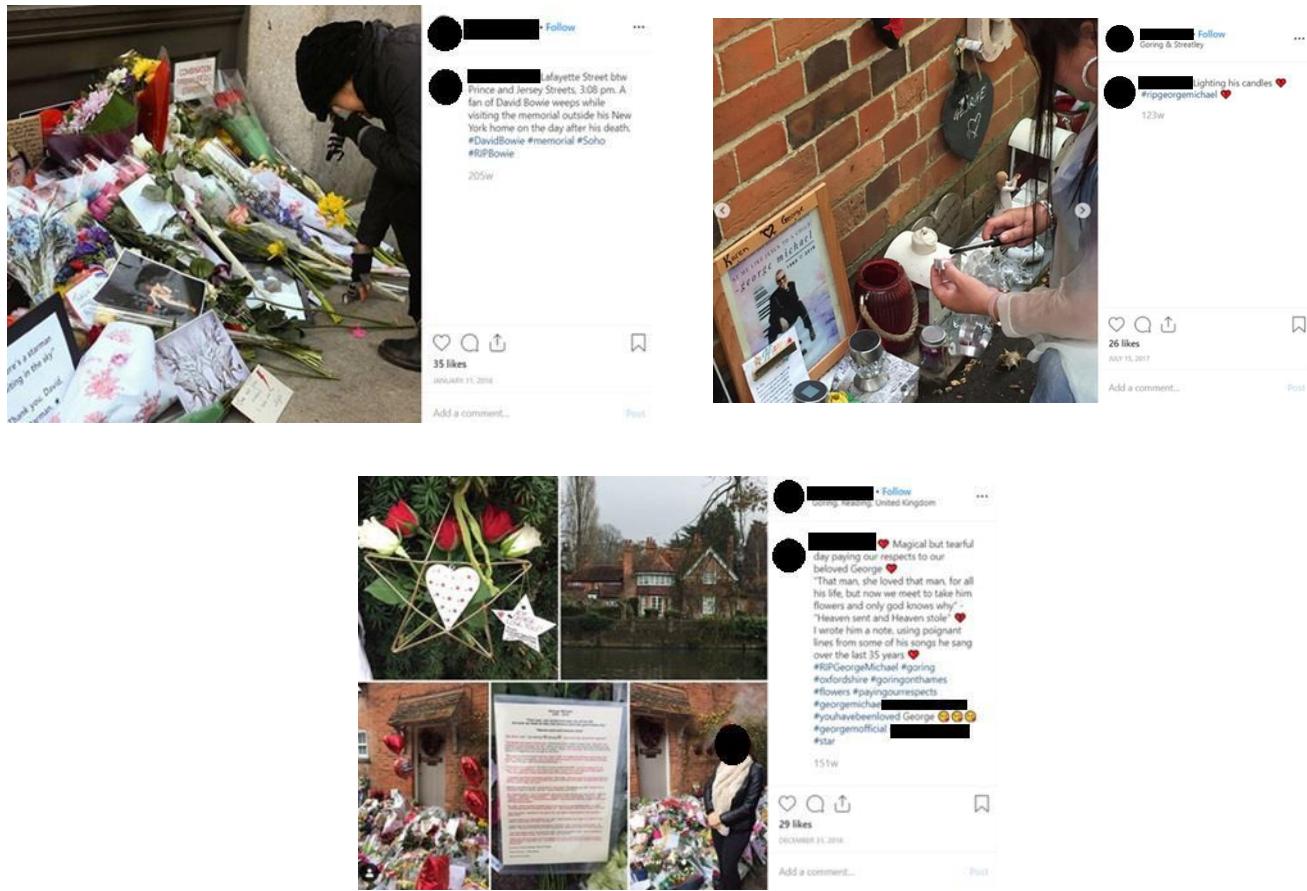


Figure 6.4

## Conclusion

### 7.1. For Whom the Digital Bell Tolls

I embarked on this thesis to answer a straightforward question to a complicated subject: What does mourning a musician look like in the digital age? By following this thread through the data I gathered, it has been possible to consider this question in multiple ways and through the spheres of several different musicians and social media platforms. I have let the data guide where the research went, allowing for the material to act as the compass through the theoretical concepts I have considered. I am fully aware of the limitations of this thesis and do not (and should not) draw the wide assumption that these conclusions are how, why, and where everyone mourns in the 21st century online space. Rather, this thesis has offered a snapshot into the ways in which people mourn musicians specifically in these spaces and opens up questions and ideas that can be tested in later research with other protagonists at its core. In this conclusion chapter, I am going to reflect back on the main themes and research questions this thesis has grappled with. I will then consider how this research can be expanded upon going forward and the avenues that have yet to be explored.

In the introduction of this thesis, I set forth my main research question, this was:

What can social media coverage of the deaths of musicians tell us about collective mourning and the mourner in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

This was followed by these subsidiary questions:

- How are musicians mourned on social media sites?
- How do the personas of both the mourner and the dead interact?
- Where does the mourner sit within these mourning practices?
- How do objects of mourning manifest themselves on these sites?

These questions have underpinned all of the material in this thesis. This conclusion will consider what I call ‘the four aspects of online mourning’ to place these questions into the context of the work of this thesis. These four aspects are: Narrative, Objects, the Meme, and the Self. I will then consider the potential of this research going forward and the ways in which it can be refined and expanded upon.

## **7.2. The Four Aspects of Online Mourning**

### **7.2.1. Narratives**

The first aspect of online mourning is narrative. This was the focus of Chapter Two, concentrating on the ways in which David Bowie was mourned through the social media site of Reddit. Considering these posts as part of a narrative process (or emplotment, as characterised in section 3.3) allows us to see the active participation of these users in the posthumous persona construction of the artist. As such, it becomes one of the places where fans come together to understand and make sense of the death of the artist through the narratives they consume and create. Thus, the space of Reddit becomes a mythscape through which narratives are structured, repeated, and added to by the mourners. This shows us that these users are mourning in two ways, as a creative act of narrative construction and as part of a community that is constructing these narratives together.

At the centre of these narratives, we saw the integration and co-dependence of both the mourner’s persona and the artist’s. The term ‘persona’ has permitted this thesis to theorise the relationship between the musician and the fan in more detail than the term ‘parasocial relationship’. The Blackstar persona, as discussed in section 3.2.1, allowed the mourners in the space of Reddit to engage and attach their own personas onto Bowie’s death. Persona, I argue, goes beyond the traditional parasocial relationship and proposes a new way to see these online interactions. As a result, the artist is a secondary figure in the user’s persona presentation. However, instead of a pluralistic set of narratives there is a heavy consensus of myth in this space, mutually understood, and collectively policed. This co-dependent

persona construction is limited to the narratives of death that are deemed to be reflective of the overall consensus of the social media space.

Narrative is created in these presentations of personas, but most importantly it is reinforced. This is seen throughout posts on Reddit in micro narratives on illness, identity, and autobiography. Instead of multiple micronarratives which differed from the official media narrative surrounding Bowie's death, this thesis found that the mourners in these threads maintained and reinstated Bowie as a curator of his own demise. This is also apparent in mourning of Leonard Cohen, as users turned to the community to explore and reinforce the narrative of the teacher persona, seen in section 3.7. The narratives presented in these spaces offer a defence for the mourner as they make sense of not just the musician's death but their own.

### ***7.2.2. Objects***

The two elements of mourning, discussed in section 7.2.1., reoccur when we consider the ways in which objects are used at the shrines of these musicians. As we saw in Chapter Three of this thesis, the objects that were presented at George Michael's Highgate home mirror what I termed 'the traditional objects of mourning,' which included flowers, candles and personal notes. However, we see a creative act in the objects that move beyond this distinction, such as the personal images, the George Michael themed memorabilia, and the kitsch objects relating to the mourner, seen in section 4.5. The social function of these objects lies in their existence within the site of the shrine, what I termed the 'presence of the objects' in section 4.4. The mourner extends their presence in the site through the leaving of objects, whether knowingly or not. This is a type of creative act, coming from a place of wanting, or perhaps needing, to do something with their mourning energy. The sociability of this is twofold; it places the mourner within the social space of the physical shrine, but it also allows the mourner to remediate themselves using the photograph to showcase their appearance at the site.

The unthought known gives us a way to think about the ways in which these objects are left in these sites. It shows us that there is a marriage between the mourner's need to engage with something physical and our shared cultural ideas of what, where, and how, these shrines should be constructed. This is evident in all of the case studies in this thesis, with objects being left at shrines becoming a universally understood means of engaging with the dead musician and their legacy. This is paralleled and added to in the online world, through the remediation of the image to showcase the presence at the shrine, whilst also displaying a form of cultural mourning capital to the other users of these platforms. The re-mixing and re-posting of past artistic works (drawings etc.), of Halloween photographs, or of records, is underpinned by the unthought known. There is a need for the mourner to display something and to then remediate it in the space of their social media feed. It exists as a different site of mourning to the one being depicted, as the physical space is remediated and joined into the conversation and organisation of the online site. There is an externalisation of an internal process when we consider these objects as part of the unthought known. Mourning, although still a deeply personal practice, can be seen within these posts as manifesting in the wider culture in a more visible way than we would have seen pre-Internet.

### **7.2.3. *The Meme***

We saw the concept of the object expanded in section 5.5. in the ways I discussed words as objects. Here, words act as a creative outlet through which mourners can remediate and remix. These words are an extension of the photographic image, mourners can use the words of the artist to not just reflect them but also creatively engage with the mourning process. These mourners are adhering to and drawing upon a shared resource of common tropes, using the words of the artist to display their own emotions. We saw this throughout the data collected in Chapter Four, but it is important to note the lack of these word posts in the mourning of George Michael. As such, we can see how these words are acting as a meme that can be easily remediated by mourner, but also as a display of cultural capital, underpinning the ways in which the mourner wants to be seen to be mourning. We can also

understand these remixed words as existing in the vernacular of Instagram prior to these deaths, drawing upon the idea of Instagram poetry and how this is used to express a form of self-help. This is an intrinsically Internet phenomenon, as mourners utilise the materials around them to creatively output their mourning emotions and experiences, whilst displaying this outwards on their social media feeds.

Through photography we can understand how memory and mourning interact, with the photograph acting as a repository for the pasts or people we are trying to mourn. The concept of the studium and the punctum uncovers the emotional aspect of the photograph and how, in the context of mourning, the emotional punctum is ascribed with the death of the artist. These photographs are evocative objects in which the mourner is instilling their own persona through the artist's image. We saw this in section 5.4. in the ways Leonard Cohen's image was continually used to reinstate the Teacher persona. We can see the twofold ways by which people are mourning with these objects, as the creative act of remediation, choosing an image, and then uploading the right one, is paired with the social act of presenting this image to your followers. This presentation highlights what the mourner wanted to see in the artist, or how they wanted the artist to be perceived. This mirrors the narratives of Chapter Two, as the mourner is presenting the photographic version of the aspects of the artist they are mourning.

The concept of the meme allows us to consider the means through which all of the posts in this thesis can be understood in the abstract, as I stated in section 5.6. These posts all act as memes, drawing upon common sets of tropes that are continually remixed and reinterpreted by the mourners as they engage, develop, and post different images, words, and narratives. This is something which we have not seen in mourning before the Internet, as mourners utilise the materials around them to creatively output their mourning emotions and experience. I argue therefore, that the concept of the meme underpins all of this work, and gives form to something that is uniquely available on the Internet. This covers the narratives of Bowie, as mourners reinstate previously posted comments and build upon the narrative of his passing through the Blackstar persona. The shrines of George Michael act as a meme through both the creative act of adding to the shrine space but also in the remediation of this physical space into the online world. The photographs and words of Leonard Cohen are used as memes to represent him, and the external image and cultural

milieu that the posters are trying to express. As such, all of these mourning posts can be, and I argue should be, considered memes.

#### ***7.2.4. The Self***

Mourning has always been about the self. However, when it comes into contact with the technology of the present, mourners find and develop new ways in which they can present themselves in the online space. Collective mourning is ultimately, I argue, about the self. All of the posts in this thesis are selfies through which mourners are expressing their personas. Ultimately, this emphasises how the images in these spaces are evocative objects. Through the display and act of taking a selfie, they are acting on the need for self-expression, but they are also engaging with the need to connect this self to the outside world and other mourners. In Chapter 5 (section 6.2) I distilled this into what I consider the two main expressions of the self in these posts:

- The Shroud of the Artist's Persona
- Overt Displays of Mourning Persona Construction

I contend that these posts all sit in this dichotomy, as mourners turn to these materials as expressions of their own personas. As we saw through concept of Instagram poetry in the section 5.5.1., the posts act as a vessel through which mourners employ a self-help aesthetic that builds upon previous platform vernaculars and Internet tropes.

Though it may be about the self, the space of the Internet also fulfils the need for a collective and social mourning. For instance, presenting the Blackstar persona (section 3.2.1.) as the intention narrative was a reflective act of the self. However, the Blackstar persona was always a vessel through which users could engage with others in the space of Reddit. This is especially evident in the shrines of George Michael and the added physicality of the evocative object embodying the vessel into which the mourner poured their private emotive ideas. However, the remediation of these shrines moves the presence of the self from a physical space to a digital space as an outwards display of mourning. This is one of

the main things this thesis has uncovered, that the process of mourning online is a selfie through which, although a private emotion, is directed outwards.

These selfies are therapeutic. We can only make sense of our lives and our emotional states when we understand how we sit within them. The selfie may be about the self at its core, but it is also made to be shared. In these contexts, the selfie is not just a neo-liberal narcissistic representation, but rather a vehicle that facilitates social and cultural engagement. This, I argue, is its function in online mourning. Narratives, objects, and memes have all acted in these mourning processes as vessels through which the self can be conveyed and presented. These selfies are all a creative act of mourning that operates as a way to harness and express the emotional disturbances of death. It is hard to determine whether the presentation of the mourner's selfie is a conscious or subconscious act. Mourners on these sites do not set forth to showcase themselves but are building on the shared social media language whilst drawing upon tropes they have encountered before. Although these selfies sit at the centre of this mourning process, they are perhaps a byproduct of it. At the heart of these posts is one thing: the urge to connect. It would be easy to dismiss the presentation of the self as a self-centred expression of mourning, but this expression is a gateway through which mourners enter the world of social media to be with others at a time of emotional distress.

### **7.3. Reflections and Future Research**

The above conclusion reinforces that I have answered the main research questions posed by this thesis. However, the spectre that has haunted this thesis throughout is the Covid-19 pandemic. This event has changed our relationship to technology in different and engaging ways. The long tail of the pandemic is going to underpin mourning scholarship going forward and this is especially true in the online sphere. Due to the nature of this project, this was not considered, however, it has been a constant presence in the back of my mind. Through the pandemic we have come to a deeper understanding of collective trauma and the importance of an online/offline hybrid engagement of our emotional state. This has sharpened our relationship with technology and humanised the ways we engage with it. By

this I mean as the world shut down, people turned to technology in numbers never seen before to try and recreate previously physical aspects of their lives. This has had two paradoxical effects. It has at once showcased what is possible to do, be, and achieve in the online world, but has also had the opposite effect of turning people away from technology and reinstating the importance of real life interactions in our lives.

As a result of this, a project which juxtaposes a 'before and after the pandemic' expression of a musician's death would be interesting in seeing how our collective social memory has changed, and if the legacy of collective trauma has distorted these ideas. I think a comparison will help understand this and draw out how memory and mourning are interlocked at a distance. This kind of comparison, for instance, could involve looking at what threads and images are shared on the anniversaries of the musicians' deaths. The manifestations of memory in mourning is the one thing I feel this thesis could have achieved better. However, due to the way my data was structured and considered (the immediate twenty four hour after the musicians death) this was a difficult challenge. Nonetheless, this leaves a space for the findings of this thesis to be expanded upon in a temporal setting. This will test these findings and consider how they are affected by the time period since the musician's death. The above approach would also allow this work to be used to consider how different social media spaces react to mourning. For instance, TikTok and the concept of the mourning meme would be a rich space for study and exploring this area would showcase how this research can be applied onto different social media platforms.

This thesis has shone a light into spaces and expanded on subjects that have been underrepresented in academia. Having been built upon immediate and prescient research, this work has allowed us to see that the development of human interactions and emotions in the online world is a complex presentation of the self. By focusing on the social networks which have been underutilised by the academic community, this piece will hopefully provoke further work into the exploration of the rich data trove of Reddit, amongst others. I also believe this is a valuable addition to the emerging field of persona studies. By bringing mourning, fandom, and persona together, this thesis has created a space in which the emotional effect of loss can be considered a selfie, a presentation of the self. Ask not for whom the digital bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

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## **Appendix 1: Methodology Book**

Starts overleaf.

Profound Self → The presentation & representation of the self  
The Self (ie) (Re)presentation(s).

Sights & Sites of Mourning.

Fan Art (Displays of ...) - Representations of the self  
→ Through others?

Narrative & Mythology.

running  
through the chapter  
→ Also  
Fandom  
how does  
this flow through  
the rest of  
them...

→ Keep those fluid.

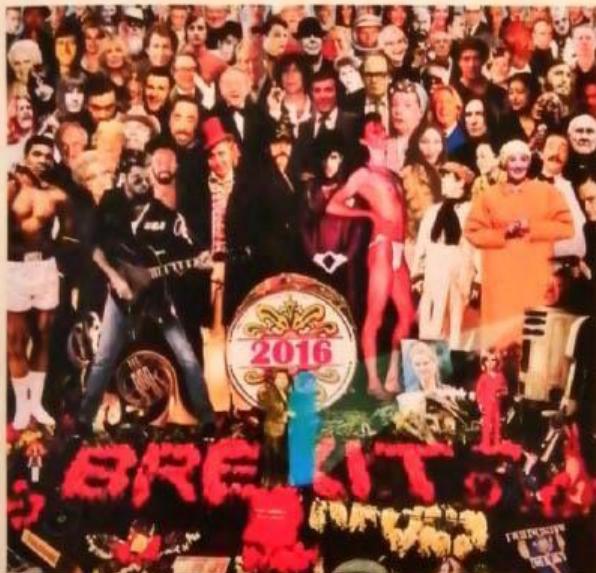


Image for the introduction.  
"The Long 2016..."

To find out, did the nurse exit before  
his death? or did it exit Because  
of his death?

+ The kit or graves? / animal's sides

Brixton

The Site of Bowie...

## Sights and Sites of Mourning.

11 Jan 2016

Twitter



0 12 88 123



PlayStation UK • @PlayStationUK - Feb 1

Suit up in your Javelin exosuit, form your Freelancer team and explore the world of Anthem™ before it launches on 22 February.

Site of  
mourning

Bowie

Brixton

Brixton  
Imaginity

Brixton

Low  
grinding/moaning

Powerful  
of  
The power

Crowds  
descended -  
A mass expression  
of mourning

→ unplanned - facilitated by Social media.  
- organized meetings - explosions 'seen' and then  
engaged with.



creates  
a locus  
for both  
the online  
& offline  
mourning



↳ Your  
mourn  
here  
too...

↳ offering a locus  
for mourning -  
A specific Site

↑ existing in an offline  
space  
- express an mass/  
communal expression of mourning -  
using his music? → online - not enough?

Sister  
to  
Drama?

↓  
look  
into  
this?



Video -- Spontaneous <sup>explosions</sup> of  
Bonds - <sup>songs</sup> // Sites of  
Meeting

videos → (clips of the night on YouTube)

creates a blurring of the online / offline worlds (as mediated  
presence)

A locus for offline and online meeting. - people  
post this... which contains the "comes together"  
we meet remotely  
we meet twice / repeatedly  
we meet together, but apart. } (projected)  
we meet somewhere, yet nowhere } (outwards)

The florce = Especially: G.M & L.C =

with tangible:

'Site' specific - A location attached to the Star



Follow ...  
Highgate

An accidental pilgrimage to George Michael's house yesterday which is covered in thousands of flowers and tributes. #ripgeorgemichael #wham #newstarinthesky

151W · I was just there before he died. sigh

151W · Reply

36 likes  
December 11, 2016

Add a comment...



offerings?

flowers -  
trad. way of  
mourning?

\* It is important  
to remember  
that G.M  
died at his  
home -

Also in death  
S.T. like  
mour  
Boles?

"Road Side"  
memorial: Similar to the material remnants we  
see?

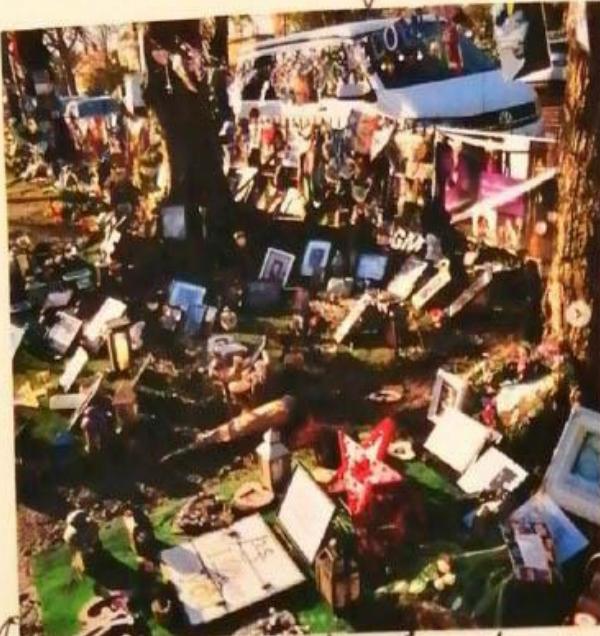
Artifacts : → The Artefacts → The photos, the T-Shirts,

Flags? - seem(s) to be people putting  
'A 22' of themselves on display ...

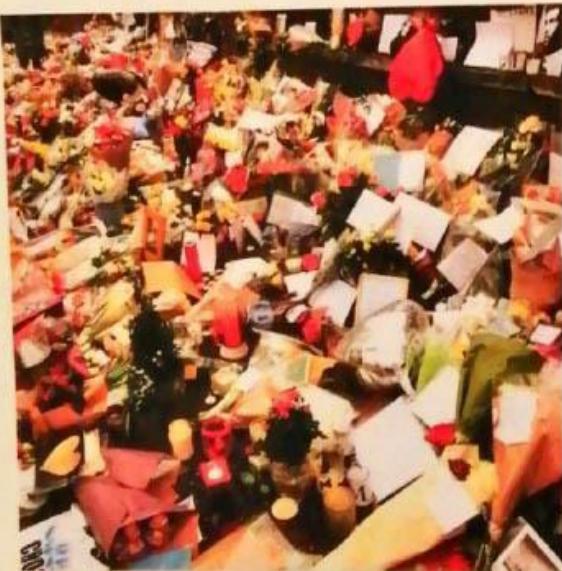
The base is significant -  
more so than a mound -  
It provides

→  
Similar to L.C.

Stated Beyond Guar's Home.  $\downarrow$  Kitchen is an element of this



(Spotted out passed - the site... } Class? → compare these  
Photos of George... } to L.C. what is different?



The signs... of mowing - The classic...  
Candles, flowers - traditional offers for  
the Saints? Religiously decorated?

Follow

● [REDACTED] Sometimes the clothes do not make the man  
#georgemichael #ripgorgegmichael  
#highgate #london #lovelondon

151K #1

● [REDACTED] Nice post!

151K Reply

● [REDACTED] Heartbroken

151K Reply

- nearly All have  
a message .

35 likes

Hang over  
from  
the  
religious  
world?  
at  
Shrine?



→ Cohen's flat is Montreal (not his death site... he died in LA).

→ They need to manifest themselves <sup>site</sup> in LA.

↑ His own albums (But they aren't really his? they are some one else's - left for him but the/are element the bridge between the artist and the fan.) - Don't all of these objects do this?

→ adding... yet a lot of things.

Bartok at Barrie's home...

The hashtags?

All images of Bowie we like



These places transcend their purpose

Bartok's photograph of his mother? Bowie will always be David

The replies? what do they tell us? (This is a side note...)

#1 "Alice Post!" → probably about? - But we need to think of appropriate replies → just as the morning punctum are 'everyday' Scrolling - So does "Mutter" or posts which are inappropriate / Don't have the right tone?  
→ George or Alice (memes?) → Instagram - not many replies...  
→ look into this... → do conversations (using)

Interesting to think / consider that these are not graves, they're burying as either bodies. It's too soon for graves, or there is none.

→ The Bin Lader idea. - Burial at sea so they avoided a place of pilgrimage - obviously very different - But similar.

These places lack a body but they have the remains of the person person...

Their ghost...

But for where?  
& how?

The visible message(s) at these sites...

Bowie...

What is on/in these messages?

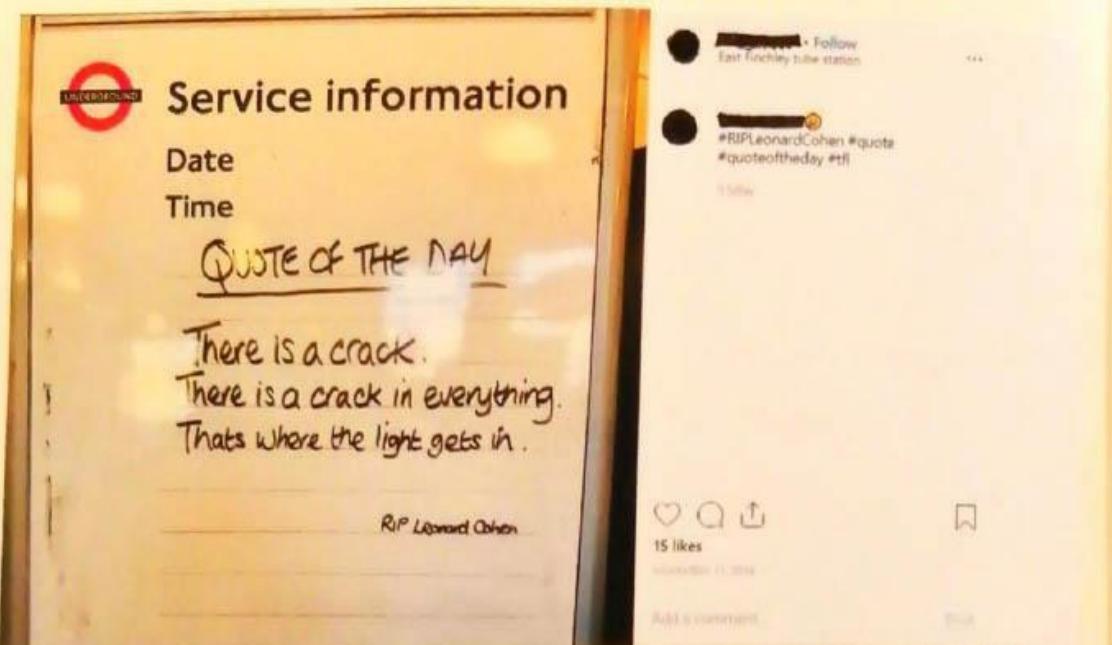
References to 'Stars'  
- all of them  
Same this - linked  
to both Bowie's  
biography and an  
expression of mourning  
/grieving...

It is important that these  
words read/should be  
seen in context - in the  
context of the shrine  
with placing of the shrine  
→ the mourning 'site'



↑  
lists of poems?  
list of songs  
list of Bowie's plays

## The Corporate Display... The neo-liberal giant



Those two 'Shon' Dreyer  
Styles on how to mourn.  
In the corporate space.  
'Honouring' →

Twitter...)



The Self (in) (and) the Site → The 'neo-liberal Self'

I want it all...

It involves me...

Putting the 'Self' - in this space -

The inserting and then display ...

linked - Something to think about <sup>in this</sup> <sub>Self</sub>

But the neo-liberal self is constructed self  
"Thought" of alongside the corporate  
memory and 'Actual' neo-liberal self.

- Self branding and actual branding.

↳ Žižek - "capitalism with a human face"  
→ Sometimes literally...



The morning selfie  
themselves in the r<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>f◊-r  
has to be / r-e-..... r.◦j t:N''' Lf to, a - - ( ;( c.



There is an odd mixture of solitude and collectiveness. People are "playing out" their "music" in a "tradicional" way of morning - outwards expressions - collecting the art of being outdoors, very not for racing outdoors, for need to be seen. morning



Follow

Paying respects to the late great George Michael with these cards, flowers and a photo I took of George at the Faith concert in 1988. So much love and emotion outside his house. Still can't believe what's happened. So sad. Been a fan since the 80's.

#georgemichael #georgerip  
#georgemichaelforever  
#ripgeorgemichael #legend  
#gone2soon #devastated #wham  
#truefan #tribute #highgate  
#thegrove #northlondon #cypriot  
#greek #history #grief

151W

26 likes

January 1, 2019

Add a comment...



Follow

#georgemichael  
#ripgeorgemichael #cypriot  
#cowboysandangels #highgate #sad  
#greek

151W  
was so sad. So many people there crying. I loved him so much x

151W Reply  
Oh [REDACTED] so sad. I remember when you went to see him live and played his album loud in the salon. ❤️

151W Reply

63 likes

January 1, 2019

Add a comment...

Post

→ The caption. - Having your own memory in these spaces? Is this a kind of cultural thing? Is it because people knew where his house was? The death site and the focal of memory.

# Sad

most locations tagged.



The spring - what can we see!



↓ A Year later the place <sup>still</sup> holds the <sup>its</sup> same journey



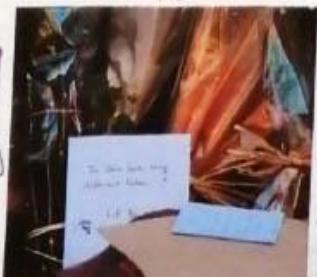
" went to pay my respects, location received...



your my friend



## "The Stars" <sup>bc</sup>



• [Follow](#)  
• [See 1,000 more](#)  
• [View profile](#) · [Create account](#) · [Report](#)  
*misses the w/*

→ the  
satire  
and  
opinion  
model

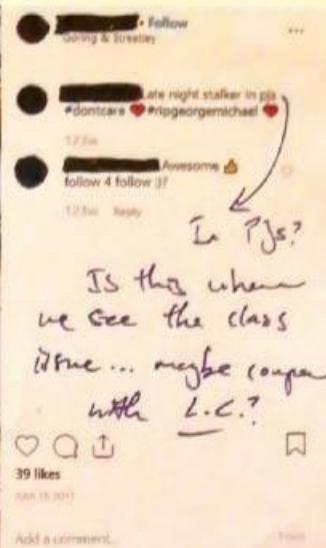
↑ "Stars" ... heavily used throughout



↑ This word is because  
the sight of his gentle  
→ repudiated / be without  
the (long) legacy

class? Does this "look" like a George Michael Fan?

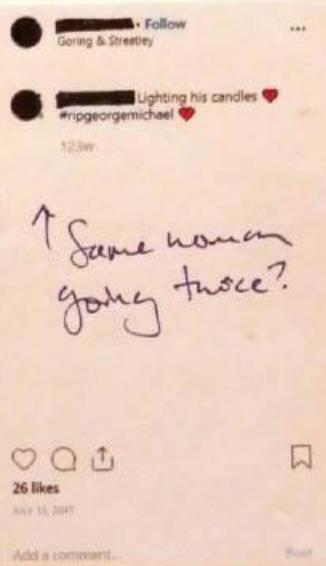
Can we say this?



Is there a class they belong to?

She sees nearly as many to these graves / shrines - have a look at the dates - stat on the Sunday

But clearly from different JEP.



"trial." Mourning practice / objects used / shown throughout. - we see this IN ALL sites. - Even the less concentrated ones?





Unbelievable RIP  
George Michael Return  
Immediately Please Will never  
understand why his boyfriend wasn't  
with him on Christmas Eve and left  
him alone 🖤😢 #georgemichael  
#georgerip #georgemichaelforever  
#ripgeorgemichael #legend  
#gone2soon #devastated #ultimo  
#trust #tribute #highgate  
#highgate #northlondon #cypriot  
#greek #history #great

153hr  
so sad too 😢😢

153hr Reply

153hr View 10 comments

34 likes

December 25, 2016

Add a comment

Report



Now it's tradition:  
#georgemichael  
#georgemichaeltribute #hollywood  
#ripgeorgemichael #lastchristmas  
#instagood #instamood #love

102hr Thank you!!

102hr 1 like Reply

View replies (0)

87 likes

December 25, 2016

Add a comment

Report

What is  
G.M spending?  
site  
photos?  
flags?  
But they  
all follow  
formalistic  
patterns



Saying goodbye...With  
Faith and Freedom and love  
#ripgeorgemichael #georgeshouse  
#highgate #london #uk  
#georgemichael #george #faith  
#freedom #gay #gayuk #gayman  
#beyourself

153hr Georg +

153hr Reply

153hr 401

153hr Reply

31 likes

December 25, 2016

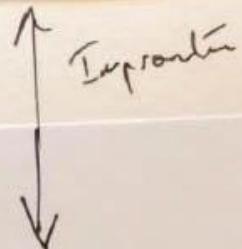
Add a comment

Report

Prince Twitter

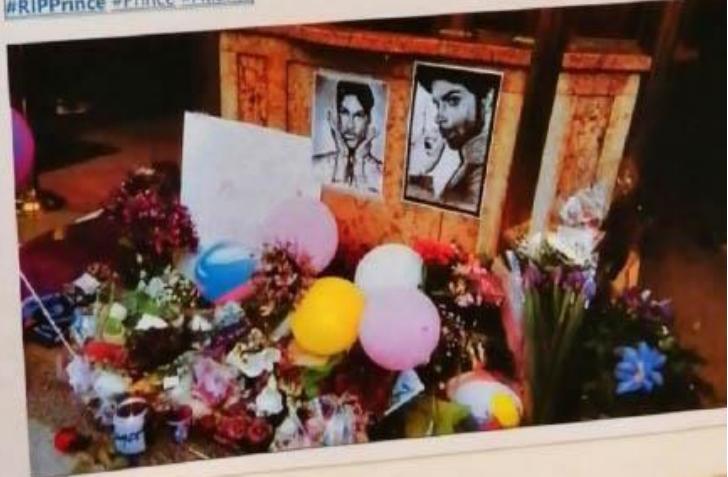
23 Apr 2016

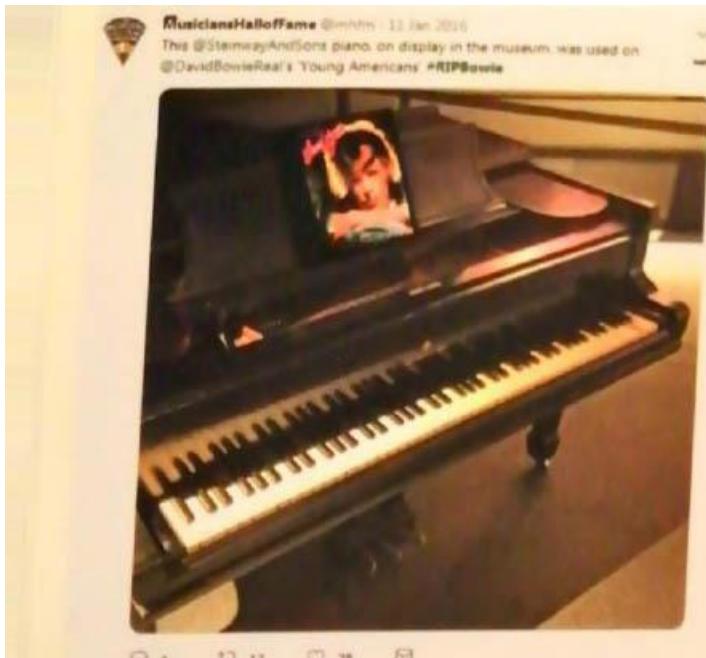
"Nothing compares to you," fans have placed a #Prince memorial next to 2008 lineup poster at #Coachella. #RIPPrince



Prince Twitter

@prince  
tribute outside  
@TheFoxTheatre  
#RIPPrince #Prince #Atlanta





**MusiciansHallofFame** @mhofm 11 Jan 2016  
This @SteinwayAndSons piano, on display in the museum, was used on  
@DavidBowieIsReal's Young Americans. #RIPBowie



↑ this poses some difficult questions

— An organonote doing this?

→ Interesting Reply  
→ what does this tell us?

The object - used  
By Bowie?

the relation to  
objects.

• [REDACTED] Follow using L.L  
for Bowie ver?

• [REDACTED] I know today it's  
#tripleleondicohen day but me and  
[REDACTED] always end up talking  
about David...  
New Bowie bracelet at the E-shop. ♡

#davidbowie #bowie #rockstar  
#concertticket #tribute #ziggystardust  
#aladdinsane #thunderbolt #thunder  
#lightening #lightningbolt  
#enameljewelry #etsyeurope  
#etsyfinds

110w  
110w · Reply

• [REDACTED] 49 likes  
110w · 11 Jan 2016

Add a comment

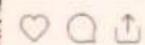


hands on them and want to try one. Was thinking Rhetoric.

150w · Reply

the  
barterhouse is better! And my  
favorite! If you can find another  
barterhouse let me know and I'll  
pay you to get it!

150w · Reply



46 likes

JANUARY 1, 2017

Add a comment...

Post

I think those should  
be in the  
Selfie Sectn  
(Re)presentation of the  
Selfie(s) ...



Displays of objects - nothing all the  
morning guitars.



Follow

seconds that you want  
being priced and out out daily. Stop in  
today we are here til 6 #Prince  
#RIPPrince #WeDidntDeservePrince  
#Talkingheads #Vinyl #Records  
#RecordsForSale #VinylForSale  
#NowSpinning #VinylJunkie  
#VinylCulture #VinylPorn  
#PhysicalMedia #SavePhysicalMedia  
#RecordStore #CTRecordStore  
#ConnecticutRecordStore #ShopLocal  
#BuyLocal #SupportLocal  
#RIDGEPORT #CONNECTICUT

Do you still have  
these?

17w · Reply



95 likes



## (Re)Presentation of the Artist

... Fan Art | Fan Videos | Photos of the Artist...



Find a use this  
for Twitter...



Twitter...

What are they  
trying to say?

- About always  
parallel planes &  
the artist:

'Perd' photos of the  
Artist.

1 13 1 14 15

11 Jan 2016  
May this star shine through and through. No need for ground control anymore.  
#RIPBowie



DANE DANIELS @daneDaneDaniels 11 Jan 2016  
Report @penn15artist  
ripbowie He inspired me so much... I loved painting him. I'll...  
instagram.com/p/8AenLoftprSM/

1 13 1 14 15

C.R. CHIN @wuchaychin 11 Jan 2016  
Bumpin' Bowie all night at @wuchowaustin and @swiftsatic #RIPBowie  
#ZiggyStardustForever



1 13 1 14 15

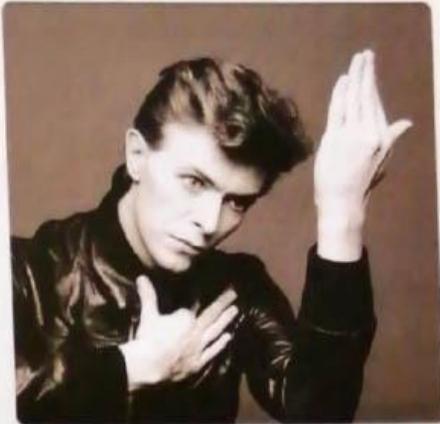
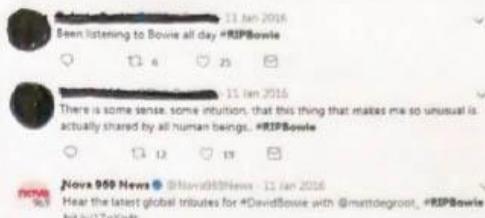
What about  
Blue ticks?  
Is it okay  
to use  
their  
posts?

← The overly  
image of  
Bowie's death.  
Rich with  
Semiotics  
presently.  
↓  
Young...  
The (f)ather,  
Biff.  
→ He is a  
Distilled Icon  
→ The empty  
vessel.

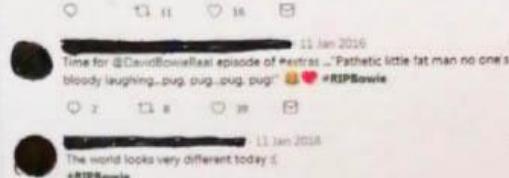
mixtures of images used...

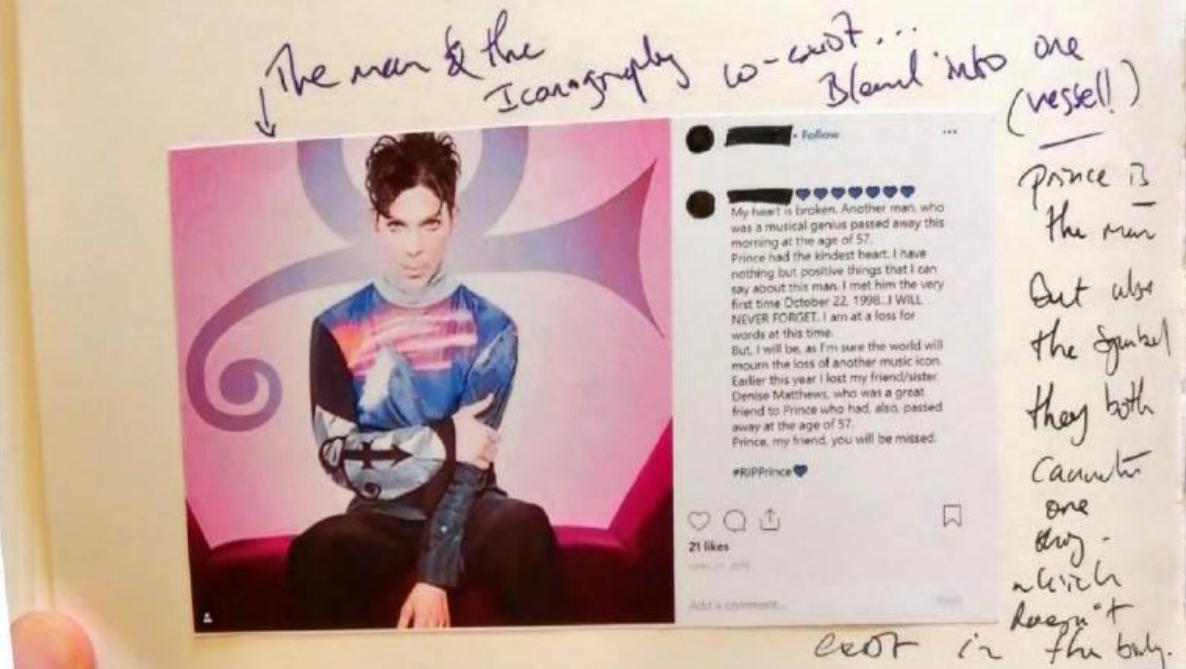
Do I have  
so obscure  
sophomore?

Come on and  
all tributes  
→ One  
place for  
all of your  
tribute  
needs.



There's more of a difference  
in the way (1) others are  
reported as each  
platform = Bowie for  
example... there's more of  
a range of "Bowie's" on  
Twitter. But this is  
reflective of the Bowie  
nature of these stars.  
Go to Bowie on Twitter  
while on Instagram &  
~~Twitter~~ looks like a 'mix' of the above.





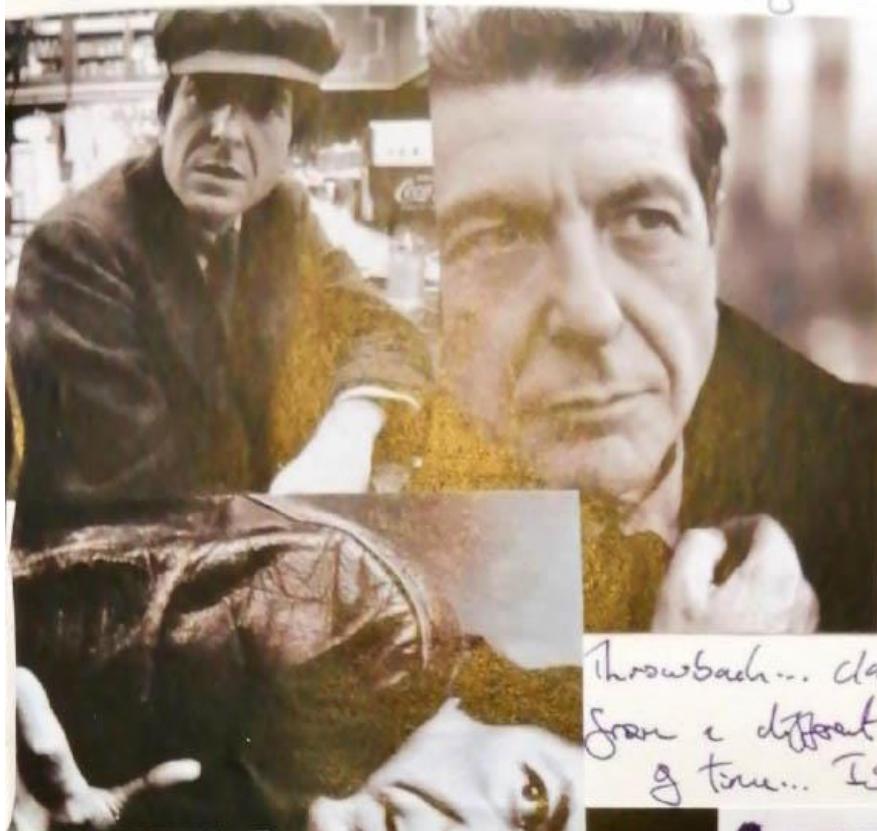
Black and White Leonard... all posted on Instagram

- why are there so little photos of him in color?

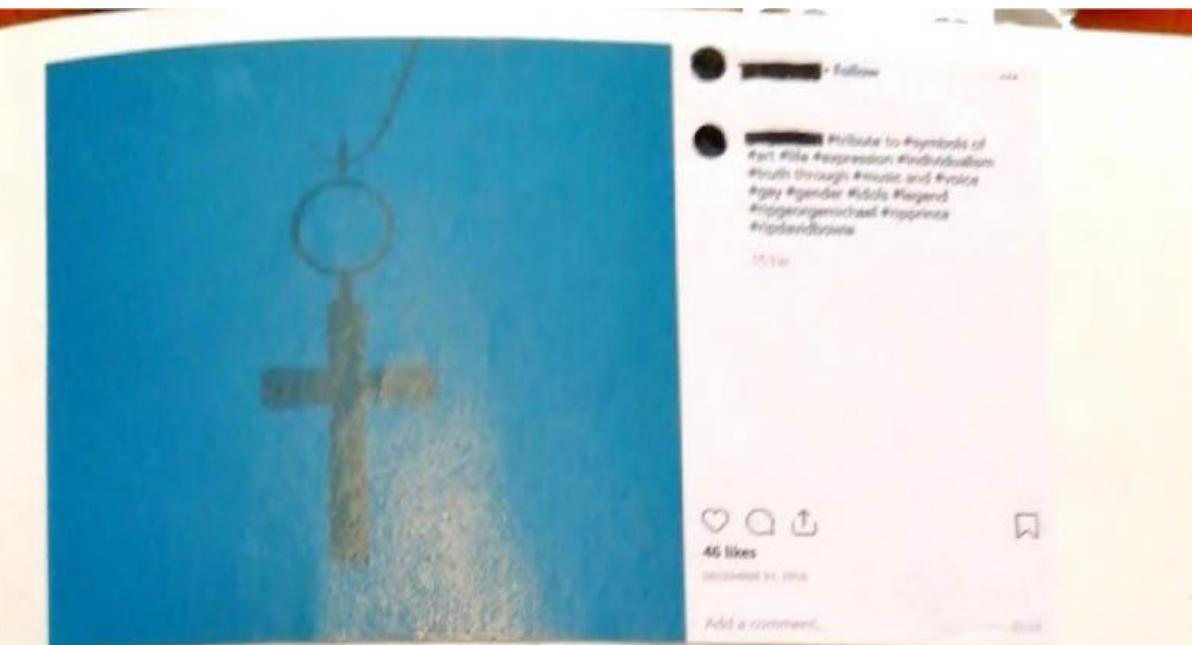
- interesting to consider B&W's an artist has going or are the fans applying the filter?

↳ what do B&W photos mean in the Instagram age...

Throwback... classy... 'Vintage'...  
From a different era... outside  
of time... Is this cohen?







Follow  
15.1M  
46 likes  
Dec 24, 2016

Add a comment Post

6. vi as a symbol? - The symbols of the past.  
Wheal into this, has every artist been reduced to a  
'Sign'

the hat as the symbol.



Follow  
15.8M  
143 likes  
Dec 24, 2016

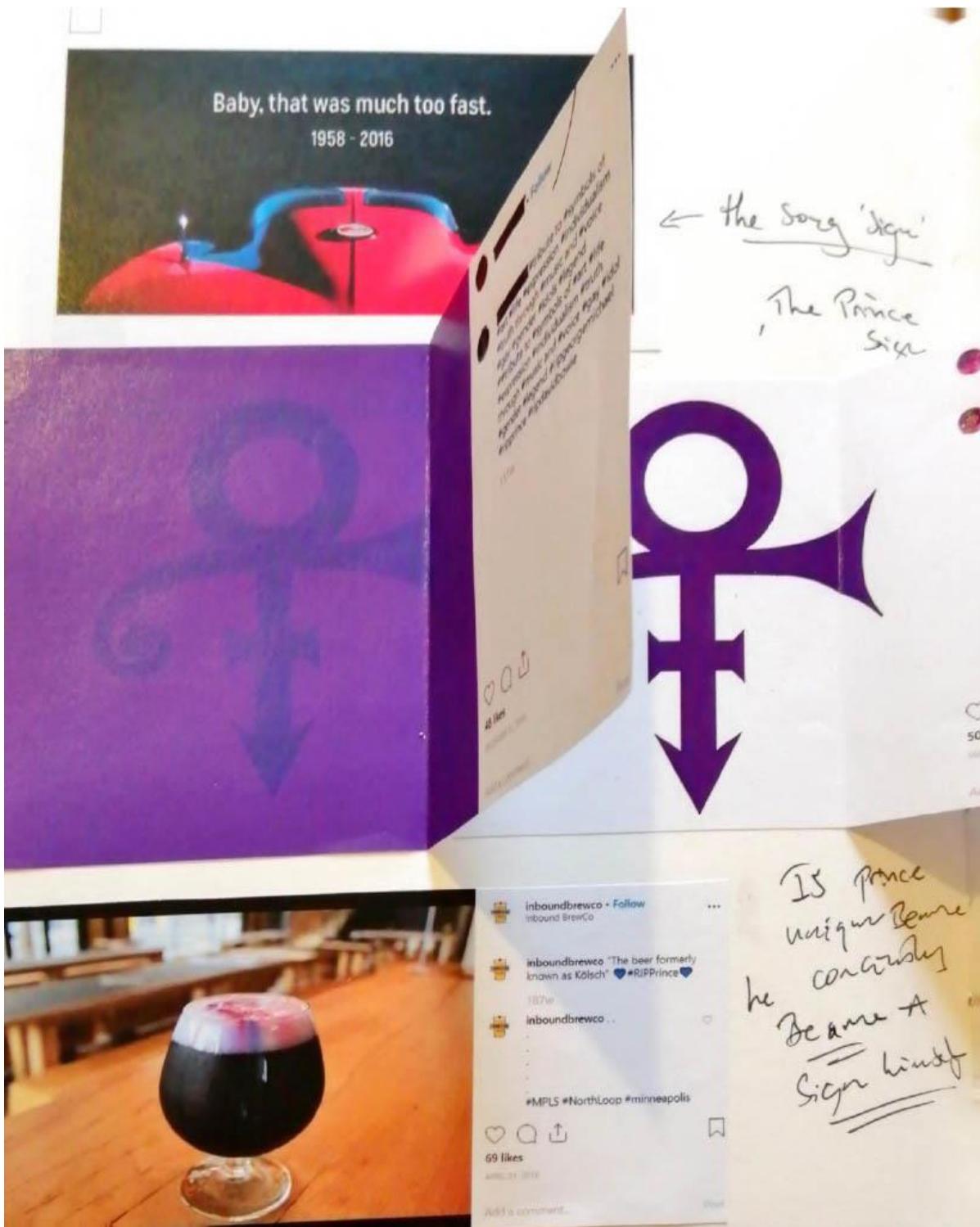
Au revoir  
mon ami...seguire ballando hasta  
el final

15.8M · Reply

15.8M · Like

15.8M · Share

Add a comment Post



## Fan Art - Drawings...



Design Roaster @Design Roaster - 11 Jan 2016  
Rest in Peace to a Legend. #DavidBowie #RIPDavidBowie #RIPBowie

Twitter...

The Ages of Bowie...

- The Person (s) of  
Bowie.

Interestingly to see the  
representatives - which  
ones are popular?  
What are people celebrating?  
What images are chosen  
is vital...

Is a selfie something  
with any  
part of the  
body in it.



All  
representatives  
with the  
word Bowie  
Include  
a profile or newsletter.





JOHNSON 100 followers - 1 year ago  
Drawing #Bowie and listening to #BlackstarAlbum seems like the only thing to do tonight #RIPDavidBowie #RIPBowie

→ A Selfie?  
→ The action shot of #Bowie  
Doing the Art.

↳ "seen the only thing  
to do tonight" - maybe  
opening the artist something.  
→ did death open?  
But is this a version of  
"working" though.



monofaces • Follow

monofaces Leonard Cohen painting was first painting of Legendary person I've done. That was in 2010. That's how MONOFACES started. Somehow his death feels very personal and I am heartbroken today. R.I.P Leonard Cohen  
#LeonardCohen #LeonardCohen #LeonardCohenArt

13m ago I'm so sorry Edita!

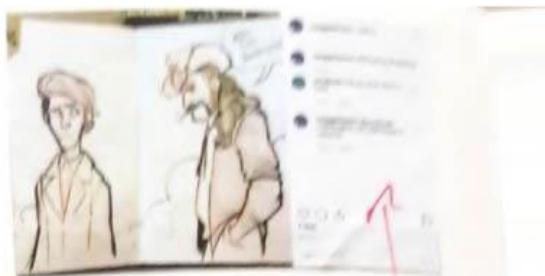
15 likes Reply

monofaces Thank you @todrawstosee

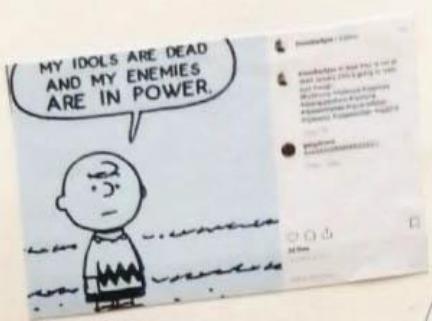
13m ago 45 likes

The Artists in the fan  
Art  
picture.

The  
Sharing  
of  
Painting.



The Authority of  
mourning?



The authority of  
Art

The Authority of  
Labour...

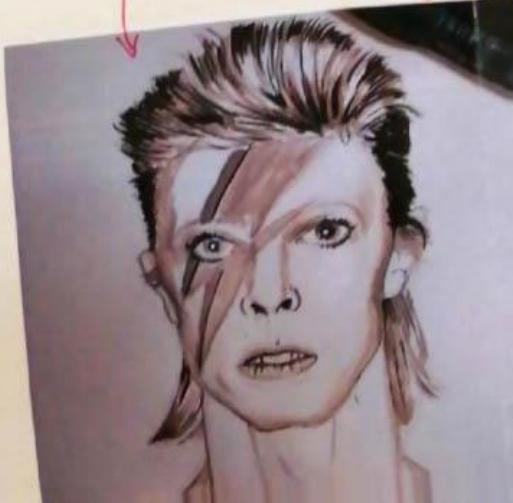
(Fandom and Labour  
is implied at this  
point...).

Popularity  
Gains  
They want  
to have  
protection...

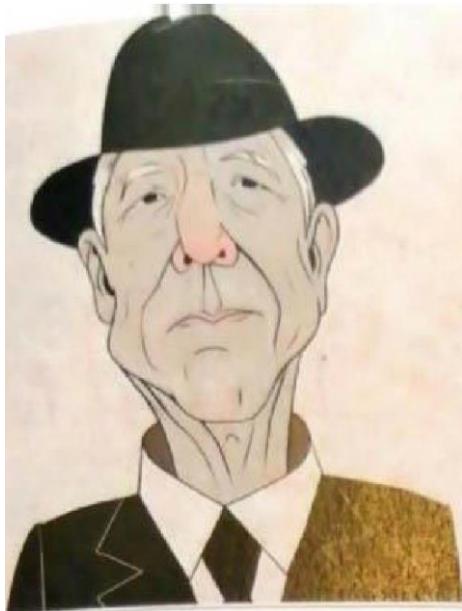
Repetition - This reduces the  
cultural capital on display...



The  
Face -  
The  
Alabith  
Some -  
person  
Face...



Pop  
or Old  
style  
(Labour)



Indie.spirit • Follow

Indie.spirit Rest in peace legend!   
#rip #appleseedcohen #leonard   
#cohen #leonardcohen   
Illustration: akunulai

marionettepaper

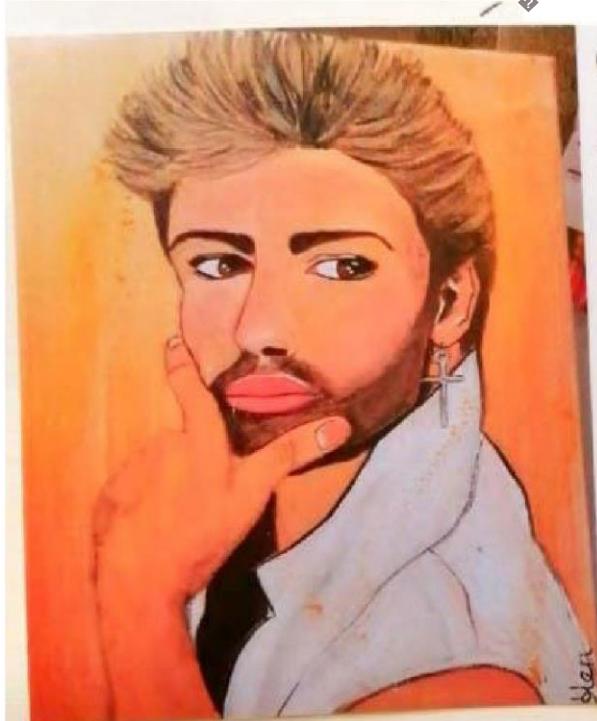
12 likes

Revelation

from

Internet

C l, e,  
.flt Uo-1



artbyjen1 • Follow

jen1 A tribute to the icons of the

•eirylic,jen1n: " •ac.ryllq;ialn!   
#georgemichael ; ,  
#deviantart #Cryli tti -♦!!  
" - , -15rnafatog; ,  
- l'dromrmr -tamo,,J,  
" . gr I

...b...iwalb-r.rtl

stilphase

r, L.IJ  
39 like•

add a comment...



only just arrived • Follow ...

only just arrived Today's etching  
#triplelehrichohen #color9  
#lehrichohen #isaacday

1566

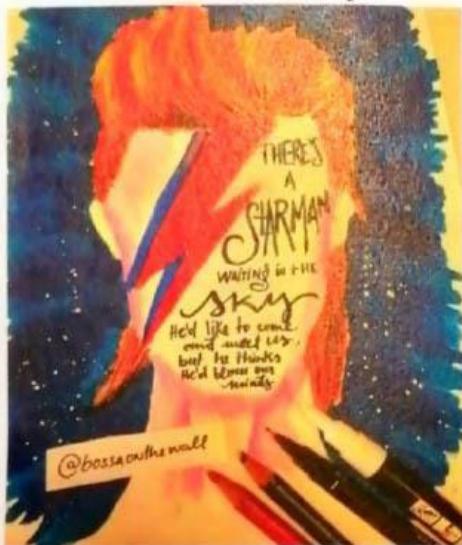
26 likes

MONDAY 16.07.2018

Add a comment

Post

↙ Find this Photo.



thillearagao • Follow ...

thillearagao 'There's a starman waiting in the sky' #ripbowie  
#starman #davidbowie #majortom  
#bowie

The artist they mixed results.

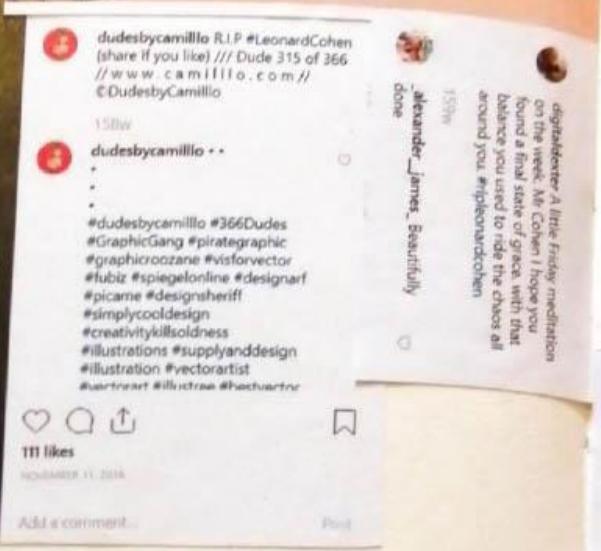
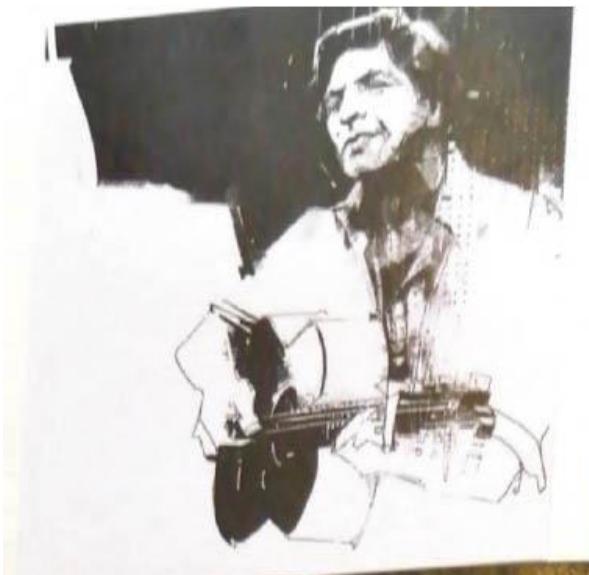
- The words allow us to displace ideas of the artist/ replace(s) his face here -

The words ACT as the individual/the artist.

True see the position of the self here strongly. - The pens show the labour

The @Shan this is an advertisement / they want credit.

(This is a reposting).



What characteristics are being highlighted by the fans - Are these ~~idealized~~ characters? These are characters - Distorted representations.

tributegeorgemichael • Follow  
Naomi Warren, Victoria

tributegeorgemichael Finally laid to rest. #rip #georgemichael #love #greatmusic #greatsinger #greatartist #sadness #sadlymissed #sad #tearstinyeyes #heartbroken #gonebutnotforgotten

sindia3699 🌿🌿🌿 rip angel  
you have been loved. ❤️

173 likes

add a comment

stage6fitness • Follow  
Stage 6 Health & Fitness

stage6fitness If you've seen the art on the walls here at Stage 6, you'll know I'm pretty bummed about the news of this gent's passing. Thank you for the tunes my good man.  
#ripbowie #ziggypayedguitar

stage6fitness #brisbanefitness  
#functionalfitness  
#naturalmovement #movnat  
#toughmudder #spartan #crossfit  
#primalfitness #nundah  
#stage6fitness

lisaloxnice • Follow

lisaloxnice 🎉🎊🎈 #ripbowie  
#davidbowie #fan 📸 @artspire

→ The meme...  
The rush y...  
Uniquely Internet things.

I don't know where I am going.. (Bowie)

I don't know  
where I'm going  
from here  
but I promise  
it won't be  
boring

-David Bowie

I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'M GOING FROM HERE,  
BUT I PROMISE IT WON'T BE BORING...

kklaavin5 • Follow

kklaavin5 RIP to one of the most glorious and iconic creatures on this planet. You will be painfully missed but your influence and presence will be thriving and pulsing through music forever. #RIPbowie #davidbowie #ziggystardust #bowievibesforever

32 likes

Add a comment

2014 · 1 follower  
Manhattan, New York

zerosixone I don't know where I'm going from here, but I promise it won't be boring - David Bowie Rip #ripbowie

zerosixone #davidbowie  
#rocknroll #music  
#sadyearformusic #toronto

2014 · 1 follower

nyomusic Another great one has left us

2014 · 1 follower

32pawsandco • Follow

32pawsandco #ripbowie #quote  
#bowie

2014 · 1 follower

During the  
mourning  
posts -  
one phrase  
usually  
Bammah's:

for Bowie  
It's the

phrase -  
what does  
they tell us  
about two  
things:

How Bowie  
is/wants to

be remembered?  
and what  
how do people  
want to be  
remembered  
all of this.

I DON'T KNOW WHERE I'M  
GOING FROM HERE BUT I  
PROMISE IT WON'T BE  
Boring

7 likes

Add a comment

2014 · 1 follower



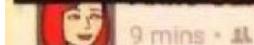
For the d "s I 11uum  
 people have been 11  
 They' y, ml mod I, .  
 M 11y h ve whnt toto

Th- h gh.  
 'fhey've p vl'd ori.  
 They've helped u 11Y o el th me to,  
 Artists huv 1nspln;-d i w h been  
 wUh u thro u

We've made memories with them.  
 So when they die, a part of us dies.

So I'm never gonna dance again  
 The way I danced with you

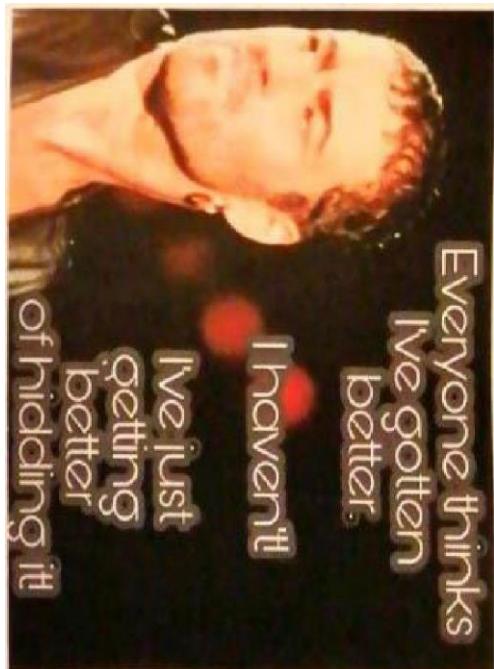
RIP George Michael



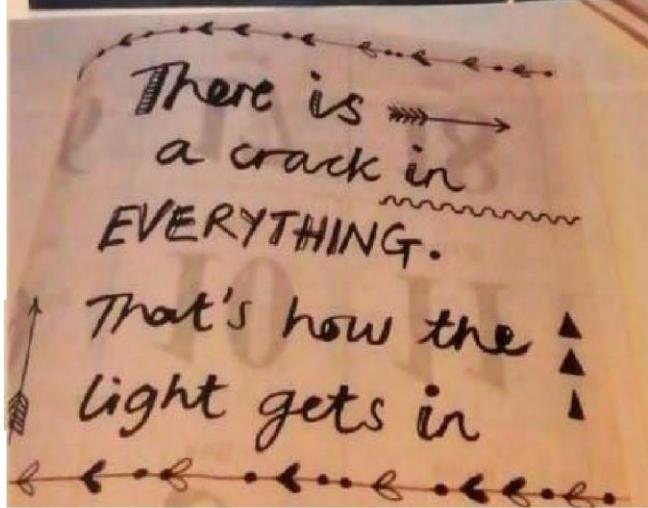
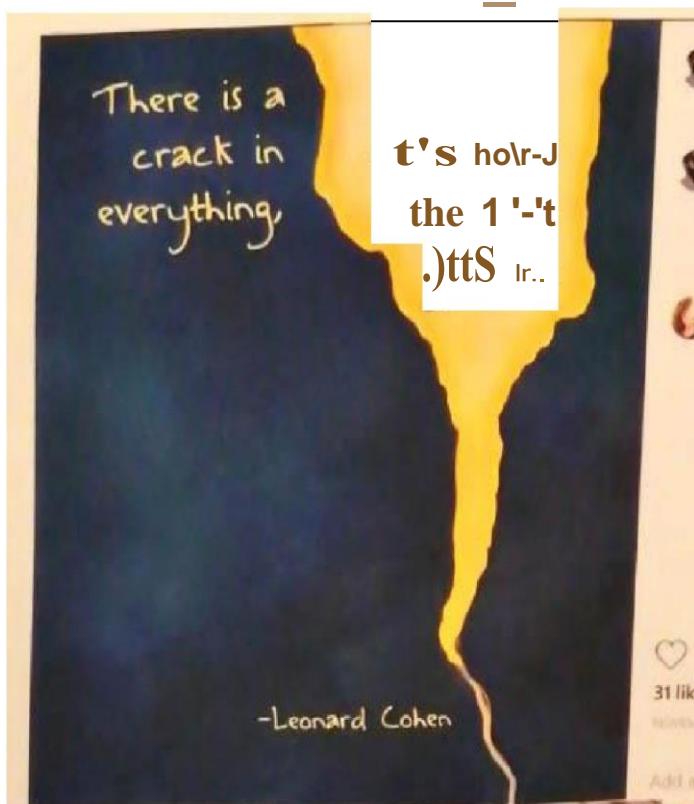
So George Michael wrote Careless Whisper at 17, but when It was released when he was 21 added Andrew Ridgeley to the writing credits so he would never worry about money. He donated all the profits from Last Christmas to Band Aid. He provided free tickets for nursing staff, and visited children and their families suffering from cancer, under "no publicity" conditions. He donated £100k every year to Help a London Child. He paid for IVF treatment after test1in a Deal or no Deal contestant said she needed to win 15k to pay for 'treatment. He played a Miners' support gig. He tipped a student nurse working as a barmaid to pay her student loan, £5k. He was part of Marc 180, Ian's son. Lots more will

ONCE BITTEN AND TWICE SHY, I KEEP MY DISTANCE, BUT YOU STILL CATCH MY EYE, TELL ME, BABY, DO YOU RECOGNIZE ME? WELL, IT'S BEEN A YEAR, IT DOESN'T SURPRISE ME...

Lim n v r 1n nd  
 the lo- :-ct. ♡♦♦♦  
 oa, e jj W, it:yzer:  
 of a good f j nd.



Cohen - There is such...



Leonard Cohen

→ The (Re)Presentation of the Artist -  
what is this representing ... A part of Cohen?

THERE IS A CRACK  
IN EVERYTHING.  
THAT'S HOW  
THE LIGHT GETS IN.

LEONARD COHEN

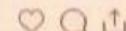
paulallanmusic • Follow

paulallanmusic My first band in the  
late 60s played mainly  
#LeonardCohen songs. In my mind, he  
is one of the three greatest  
songwriters of all time (alongside Bob  
Dylan and Joni Mitchell)

158w

paulallanmusic

#PaulAllanMusic #Music  
#Musician #MusicPlayer #guitar  
#guitarist #GuitarPlayer #Hawk  
#rock #country #song  
#songwriter #MusicTime  
#MusicLife #trip  
#musiclover #dylan



65 likes

NOVEMBER 11, 2016

Add a comment...



Post

ninamduncan • Follow

ninamduncan Beautiful light whilst  
journaling this morning

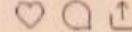
Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering  
There is a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in  
-Leonard Cohen-

#tripleonardcohen #morninglight  
#cracks #howthelightgetsin

158w

ninamduncan

#leonardcohen #wordsofwisdom  
#onetv #onet #songwriter



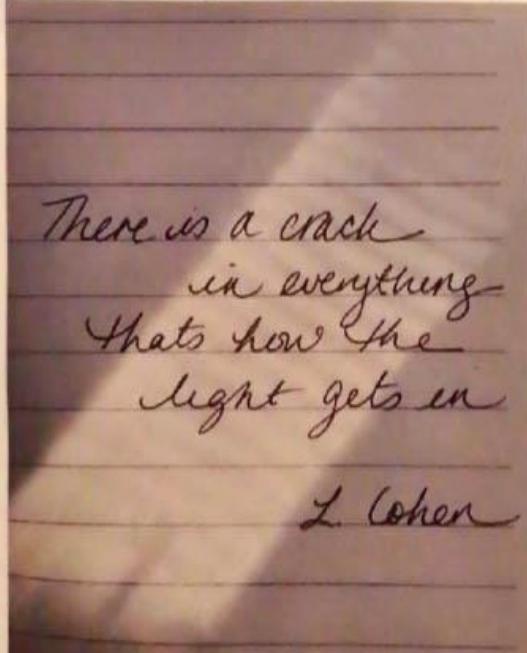
191 likes

NOVEMBER 11, 2016

Add a comment...



Post



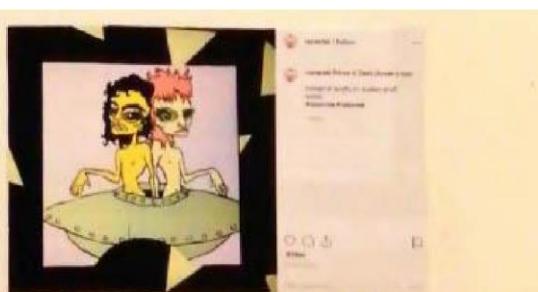


is that herbox?



1..

↳  
Artists  
put  
together  
why?



The mystery IS  
the  
meme - and

↳ Both Aliens?



