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Fans on the threshold: Steve Jobs, the sacred in memorialisation and the hero within

Anu Harju and Johanna Moisander

Aalto University

This paper examines the ways in which fans employ the mythological hero narrative after the loss of their object of fandom to make sense of and rationalise the past events. The study focuses on Steve Jobs fans and their online memorialisation practices and looks at how the fans as consumers construct the post-mortem identity of Jobs as a hero of our times. Our analysis suggests that through these communal memorialisation practices the fans engage in practices of fandom and identity work in ways that typically characterise religious groups. While death marks a separation in fan relationship, it also offers a threshold to the sacred realm and via memorialisation a continued and renewed connection with the object of fandom.

‘Death is very likely the single best invention of Life.’
Steve Jobs, 2005, Address to Stanford University.

Introduction

As myths operate on the basis of repetition and circulation of narratives (Maffesoli 2007), they are as pervasive as they are ubiquitous. In the literature on consumer research, myths have been studied extensively to understand the experiential, moral and ideological dimensions of consumption (Belk and Costa 1998; Kozinets 2001; Thompson 2004; Üstüner and Holt 2007; Thompson and Tian 2008; Luedicke, Thompson and Giesler 2010; Arsel and Thompson, 2011; Brown, McDonagh and Shultz 2013). Myths offer the enchantment claimed to have disappeared from our modern, technological world. It is often said that science has displaced religion, resulting not only in secularisation of religion, but also in alternative forms of spirituality. In most religions, the ideology of God being primary and thus representing the absolute truth is the foundation of the doctrine, monotheistic religions in particular. Cupitt (1998: 3, 8–9), in his examination of mysticism in our postmodern era, brings up the notion of ‘mysticism of secondariness’, by which he wants to underline the notion that nothing is primary. With no absolute origin or reference point, no entity representing the absolute truth, we may find mysticism in places other than religion or religious institutions. Consumption is one such activity that offers consumers the opportunity to experience the sacred in a secular context (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Bonsu and Belk 2003; Belk and Tumbat 2005; Muñiz and Schau 2005).

In this paper, we draw on the consumer culture theory (CCT) literature on sacralisation of the secular and mystification of the profane (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989; Schau and Muñiz 2007; Rinallo, Scott and Maclaran 2013) to study fandom as a ‘sacred devotion with a secular focus’ (Belk and Tumbat 2005: 206). By means of a netnographic study, we set out to explore the practices of fandom that the fans of the late Steve Jobs engage in after the loss of their object of fandom. Focusing on the online memorialisation practices that the fans engage in, we elaborate, in particular, on the ways in which the fans employ a mythological hero narrative, the myth of the archetypal hero (Carlyle 1840; Campbell 1949), to construct the post-mortem identity of Mr Jobs as a hero of our times and as a reflection of their unrealised self: the hero within.
Our analysis suggests that in the process of bereavement, the object of fandom undergoes a significant resemiotisation process, whereby some meanings and artefacts become sacralised. In this discursively constructed transformation process, the fan object achieves an elevated status as object of worship, all the time becoming more and more an object of consumption. As fans create, recreate and negotiate the meanings produced in the acts of remembrance, a (digitally) mediated and discursively constructed simulation of the past emerges: during the process of memorialisation, the status and identity of the object of fandom is transformed from a celebrity CEO to a spiritual leader, a hero of our times. In this process, the commemorative fan productions create a site and a digital space for re-visitation of meaning(s) and ritualistic acts of remembrance. The newly created artefacts offer continuation and comfort amid sorrow and a sense of loss; the material commemorations allow the continuation of the fan relationship after death. In this way, the fans ensure the continued consumption of what once was, if in newly acquired and modified ways.

A sociology of religion – perspective on fandom as sacred consumption

In building our theoretical perspective on fandom as hero worship and sacred consumption, we draw on the sociology of religion of Eliade (1959 [1957]), who emphasises duality of existence. In Eliade’s framework, the profane is separated from the sacred by a boundary and this boundary is essential as not only does it create the binary, it acts as a threshold allowing transition from the profane to the sacred realm. The sacred gains its significance as the ontological founding of what is real, of the world itself: the sacred, whatever it may be manifest as, provides the centre, a point of orientation.

For Eliade, the need to locate the real drives people to the sacred; for the religious individual, the sacred is what constitutes the real. As a result, for individuals accepting to live in the profane space, existence appears unstructured. Eliade saw the notion of the sacred as a psychological construct, however buried deep and forgotten for most. Due to this even the most unreligious individual leading the most desacralised existence preserves religious valorisation of the world to a lesser or greater degree (Eliade 1959 [1957]: 23). This manifests in consumption behaviour today as consumers assign a qualitative difference to spaces and times of emotional importance, often anchored in and mediated by materiality.

As the sacred is a matter of a qualitative difference as it is experienced, the notion is easily transferred to a secular context. Fans regularly engage in their fandom with objects with fervour akin to religious devotion and create rituals and practices to uphold their devotion: the sacred is inherently in the experience. Hierophany, the presentation of the sacred, is essential in the formation of religion (Eliade 1959 [1957]): his notion of ‘eternal return’ whereby rituals and myths not only commemorate hierophanies, but participate in and even constitute them. Religious behaviour can be characterised as participating in sacred events, not only commemorating or imitating them, and it is in this way that rituals restore the mythical time (Eliade 1959 [1957]).

Hero worship in memorialisation

In studying fandom as hero worship, we draw on Carlyle (1840: 15), who viewed hero worship, the ‘transcendent wonder’ of someone greater than oneself, as ‘an eternal corner-stone’ of society that would always stop humankind from spiralling down to destruction. To Carlyle, hero worship was not only a natural and ever occurring behavioural tendency of all individuals but also what society was ultimately built on (1840: 12). In his view, individuals have an inherent need for worship, manifested throughout the times in religious worship and in worship based on mythologies. Today, many consumers follow and idolise celebrities. Even celebrity fandom reflects the values of the fans. What makes the Steve Jobs fans see him as a hero, and not only as a celebrity? Much of the hero worship takes place after his death. This is an interesting aspect of fandom as death is also an important element in the hero myth and in religion, too.
Steve Jobs died on 5 October 2011. The fan community was shocked, saddened and hurled into productive action: they mourned visibly and publicly, paying homage to the former CEO of Apple by creating the most imaginary of tributes. The Apple stores flooded with flowers, candles and various digitally mediated farewells. From the humble beginnings of his life as an adopted child up to his very public and painful death, to many in this congregation, Jobs with his unique ‘from rags to riches’ life story epitomises the American dream. More than a celebrity CEO, his life is the ultimate hero narrative of our times. In his study on celebrities, Hollander (2010: 389, quoting Boorstin) brings up the temporal difference between the hero and a celebrity, stating that whereas the hero is made by folklore and sacred texts, the celebrity is always a contemporary. What happens to the memory of fandom object after death in the hands of devout fans is akin to transformation via folklore, that is, by revision and rewriting of history; the fans write their own fan text and construct meanings appropriate for their needs. Heroes have always reflected the needs of society (Carlyle 1840) and accordingly, the manifestation of the hero changes as times change; the hero stands to reflect the state of the society and its members at the time.

Of time’s effect on the hero, Boorstin says ‘the passage of time, which creates and established the hero, destroys the celebrity’ (quoted in Hollander 2010: 389). Following the notion of time, we may note that in time, the memory also changes and acquires a different place and status in the cultural consciousness, which in itself serves to sustain the myth. As a contemporary, Steve Jobs transforms from a celebrity CEO to a hero of our times, but only after his death. Jobs and his identity undergo change as fans (re)create their own interpretations of history; the fans write their own fan text and construct meanings appropriate for their needs. Heroes have always reflected the needs of society (Carlyle 1840) and accordingly, the manifestation of the hero changes as times change; the hero stands to reflect the state of the society and its members at the time.

Memorialisation, then, serves a multitude of functions. One of the purposes is to establish a continued relationship with the deceased. Another function is facilitation of adapting to life without the person who has died (Romanoff and Terenzio 1998). Generally, mourning is discussed in conjunction with the beloved. In the case of fandom, the relationship is one of affective consumption, framed in a cultural context and not based on a personal or a (seemingly) intimate relationship. However, as emotionally charged as fandom can be, it would be surprising if a sense of loss was not felt upon the death of the object of fandom. Memorialisation fills the gap left by the deceased. Producing commemorations and sharing in grief also helps sustain the community and legitimise grief. We may argue that post-mortem fandom is a form of extended memorialisation: as such, the object of fandom is in constant change, his/her post-mortem identity subject to renegotiation as the collectively constructed and attached meaning(s) shift, reflecting the changes in the fan base and their ideologies.

Eliade saw all myths as myths of origin, that is, creation myths that account for creation of something and also how the society came to be. This is because essentially what myth does is recount when the sacred first manifested itself, representing the truth. The creator is thus equally important. The Jobs fans tell the myth of how society as we now know it came to be; Jobs brought progress to humanity in the form of technology. They re-tell the narrative and in appropriating the story they mythologise his life as the hero narrative. It is understood in consumer culture studies that consumers regularly draw on myths to gain a deeper understanding of the culture. Myths are also used to frame individuals’ identity work, which fandom inherently is.
Empirical study

Netnography, as defined by Kozinets (2010), was used as the method for data collection. Over the course of one year, 2012–2013, the author followed fan interaction in social media sites, e.g. YouTube. The author also investigated fans’ digital productions shared online. The researcher remained an observer only. One video with its user commentary was chosen as an exemplar, a video titled ‘In Dedication: Thank you, Steve!’. The video has 353,735 views and 680 comments, eliciting fierce debates over the representation of Jobs. Consumer comments on Apple’s memorial website, www.apple.com/stevejobs, were also observed for the purposes of further establishing the ideological basis of the fandom and the recurrent narrative themes.

The research design is data driven and the research questions emerged from the empirical material. Looking at the fans’ memorialisation practices on social media sites, the study aims to shed light on the ideology underlying the fans’ collective identity. Examining the evaluation of experience(s) uncovers the signification process underlying collective memory construction and reveals which meanings are foregrounded. Looking at the role material plays in the fannish consumption and acts of remembrance helps establish the spiritual elements of consumption.

The texts were analysed using content analysis and discourse analysis informed by Appraisal analysis (Martin 2004; Martin and White 2005), a framework for analysing negotiation of interpersonal and social relationships in text. The ideological and attitudinal positioning assumed by the writer manifests in text as positive and negative evaluations. Such interpersonal meaning is ‘the rhetoric power of language’ (Martin 2004: 341). Martin (2004: 341) points out that ‘a close reading of evaluation in discourse shows us something of the multidimensionality of what it means to belong’. Based on semantics rather than grammar, Appraisal is suitable for analysis in various research paradigms and it is particularly suitable for researching community interactions.

Findings

Steve ... you have brought wonders to our lives. Thank you and we all love you.

(Chew)

Religious narrative and the hero myth are prevalent themes in the fan discourse. In terms of his life events, Steve Jobs fits the hero narrative all too well. Typically, the hero answers the call to adventure and thus goes on a heroic quest. During the journey he gains knowledge and wisdom. The journey is riddled with difficulties, but the hero prevails and upon his return shares his wisdom. Steve Jobs’ epic journey of a career was riddled with difficulties, but he returned and shared his wisdom with the world in the form of technology. This type of narrative, depicting Jobs’ life as a heroic journey, is told by both Jobs and his fans. Jobs epitomises many of the characteristics of the archetypal hero, and true to the times, it is only fitting that he operated in the field of technology. Hero worship presents the central theme in the fandom studied here. It is contrasted with the hero narrative found in religion(s) and parallels will be drawn between fan practices in memorialisation and religious practices. The discussion on our empirical analysis will thus be divided into these two strands of emergent meanings. However, as these two themes are intertwined, the interrelation will be addressed in more detail in the discussion.

Steve Jobs, the hero apparent in fannish consumption

The hero is born – the journey metaphor

Hailed a hero by the fans, Jobs embodied the American dream; he was a self-made man who rose from rags to riches due to his resilience, individualism and extraordinary genius. The hero myth relies heavily on the heroic journey. It is not only the heroic deed, the gift, that defines the hero
but the journey is of equal importance. The origin of the hero narrative can be traced back to the speech Steve Jobs gave at Stanford 2005, his commencement address to the graduates. In his speech, Jobs rhetorically framed the struggles he had faced in his personal life and career as opportunities, and having later achieved great success the narrative, retrospectively, made sense: he was a survivor, and against all odds, at that. Having been given up for adoption, and rejected by the first adoptive parents, he was finally placed in a loving, if poor, family. The hero myth recounts miraculous circumstances surrounding birth. He had managed to go to college, again against the odds and through perseverance and hard work, yet he decided to drop out. In the speech, Jobs frames this as a positive outcome as he then had time to do things he enjoyed, which would later on influence his work. Jobs cultivated the meagre living and lead an ascetic lifestyle, recounted in his speech. Campbell (1949: 332–333) believed asceticism was a way for people to uncover what lies at the core. The realisation of the essence is at the very heart of the hero myth. In the speech, Jobs describes how, once at Apple, he was fired at thirty: ‘So at 30 I was out. And very publicly out. What had been the focus of my entire adult life was gone, and it was devastating’. In fact, he was fired by the very man he had hired, from Pepsi.

Here enters the blunder (Campbell 1949: 42) that throws the hero to the other side; this corresponds to the call to adventure, which is not always self-initiated. Jobs, however, rhetorically frames this also as an opportunity that has a happy ending: now free, and freed, this time led Jobs to his most innovative creations. This period represents the time in the unknown, ‘the fateful region or both treasure and danger’ (Campbell 1949: 48); in real life, it was Jobs’ garage, which carries enough symbolism and is certainly not the only garage story in Silicon Valley, with Steve Wozniak as the helper on this journey through the unknown, riddled with challenges. But alas, the hero prevails: Apple hires Jobs and he makes a comeback that defies best fiction. In his personal life, Jobs had survived cancer (at the time of giving the Stanford speech). He talks to the graduates of hope, courage, love, and of death. All the elements of the great hero narrative are there.

Jobs’ ideology most likely changed due to the battle with cancer, or so it would seem based on how his speech is structured and which themes arise. Facing death changes priorities, and this, too, may signify rebirth, as death is always followed by new birth, but death may mean the freeing of oneself from the shackles of one’s own past ideology.

The rest of the hero narrative is filled in by the fans. New technological advancements, the iPhone, FaceTime, the iPad, were all taken as gifts from Steve Jobs. He is seen as the one who brought progress to humanity. He is seen as someone who is always sharing with and giving to the fans. The fans see Apple technology as Jobs ‘boon’, the hero’s gift, the elixir, that the hero hands down upon his return. This, then, is by definition of global benefit.

Steve
Thank you for changing the world. You leave behind so many fans, well wishers and now grievers. I can’t begin to say how wonderful of a person you were in my eyes. A warm smile and a kind heart shines in lasting memory and hope that your family can hold up ok without your presence. I love the feeling, that I knew you through the product you made. You will never be forgotten. You are Apple. I am Apple. Thanks for every seed you planted, for the roots that spread through the world and for the fruits of your beautiful mind and efforts. Thank you for Apple.

(Kyle from Austin)

The hero’s first duty is to conquer fear; the last act, death or departure. However, even in the face of death the hero shows no fear – otherwise he would be no hero, Campbell (1949) notes. Incidentally, Jobs made a point of emphasising that ‘you can only join the dots afterwards’, thus encouraging the graduate students and others listening not to be afraid to take on new challenges. The clips the fans circulate all underline the basic tenet of Jobs’ own belief of follow-
ing one’s own intuition; he vehemently warned against ‘living someone else’s life’, a message welcomed by the fans and recycled in their productions. Eliade points out that myth recounts the origin, as it is the story of when the sacred first appeared. After his death, the fans appropriated Jobs’ narrative to produce new meanings: which meanings become privileged and which are elided in the emergent hero narrative is telling of the underlying ideology of the remembrance. The fan productions most often revolve around the message first articulated in Stanford, by Jobs, so we recover Jobs as the one who initiated the hero narrative.

**Elevation and the big divide**

Mythical heroes regularly enjoy an elevated status as a marker of their special capabilities. In memorialisation, the fans discursively construct a divide to exist between them and Jobs, elevating him at the same time as someone to aspire to, but also as so unique that ‘mere mortals’ could never attain his level of genius. This ambivalent approach to his being is, on the one hand, indicative of the fans’ aspiration to be like him, yet on the other hand, of their resigned acknowledgement that only a few could be like him. It is in this quiet resignation that the notion of heroness is amplified and the myth gains momentum. After all, if we could all be like the hero, by definition, the hero would cease to exist. The following fan farewell demonstrates how fans conceptualise the relationship between them and Steve Jobs; as Jobs on a higher plane, which is most likely unattainable by any fan who is ‘just another Apple user’:

The world has truly lost a great man, a creative thinker; a man who has changed all of our lives. I didn’t know Mr. Jobs personally, knew nothing about his personal life. I just followed his career as he appeared in the media like most anyone else. I could probably never hope to be as influential as Mr. Jobs was. I’m no one, really, just another Apple user. However, Mr. Jobs’ death comes at a time when I’m trying to figure out what life holds for me. I just moved to a new city, recently graduated with a Master’s degree – the world should be my oyster, so to speak. But it wasn’t until about an hour ago, when I learned that Mr. Jobs had died, that that actually meant something. We all have some untapped potential, and Mr. Jobs was living proof that if cultivated, some of us have the propensity to create something great and unfathomable to most. The life of Steve Jobs will be celebrated for years and years to come. May he rest in peace. (Danielle)

The ambivalence felt by the fans is what maintains the fandom and which serves as the basis of hero-worship. Elevation in position through the construction of mythical narrative to explain Jobs’ life is a means to comprehend the events and relate them in one’s own life.

**Reverence after death: the social importance of hero-worship**

If anything, the fans seek guidance from him even after his death; they draw meanings from his life, his words and his choices. They return to video memorials to experience the affective state Jobs’ words bring about time and time again. They consume him over and over again. Participating alongside heroes and other emblematic figures, Maffesoli argues (2007: 31), gives us a sense of ‘quasi-mystical communion, a common sentiment of belonging’. In a similar vein, Carlyle (1840) believed that in hero worship, the worshipper is indeed made higher, too, by doing reverence to an individual greater than oneself. Self-betterment is a common theme in the fan farewells, as this one from the Apple memorial site illustrates:

Steve helped me to realise myself what I can do and what I should not pay attention to. Do best as one can. His spirit will be the part of my remaining life. It seems
that he did not pass away. I can feel him around my working time. (Bruce from China)

Maffesoli (2007: 31) further states that these figures are objects more than subjects due to the fact that they only exist in the minds of other people as ‘ideal-types’. We see the construction of an ideal type in extreme fandom, where fans build the object of fandom ‘in their own image’, that is to say, as an extension of the (idealised) self (Sandvoss 2005). As the commemorative video tributes show, the initial recontextualisation of meanings is a selective representation of the fandom object, reflecting the fans’ vision. From the discursive construction of his being in the acts of remembrance emerges a new reality, the hyperreality whereby the new reality is a simulation of the past as it is imagined. In their narratives, the fans create a picture of Jobs as their inspirational leader, who gave the fans strength to follow their dreams and confidence to achieve it. These personal, emotional benefits continue to be felt after death:

This is truly amazing, well done AzR you are really talented. We will all miss Steve very much, he has been a huge inspiration in my life and I just wanted to thank you for this great video. R.I.P Mr. Chairman! (Ptaz)

This video always gives me strength and motivation to keep following my dreams everything Steve says hits straight to the hart, God bless you Steve. (Anonymous 2)

Doing this, they also continue to co-construct the post-mortem identity of the object of fandom, shaping it in the image of their own ideology, their dreams and desires.

Change – the sense of before and after

Heroes bring about change. Campbell talks about the different scope of the change, how in a nursery hero the change happens in the person and is internal, and how in the hero myth the change is global.

In their lives, many people see the world change. Not many people, in their lives, change the world. To Steve Jobs, the man, the innovator, and living symbol of the American Dream who inspired us all. Though you lie at rest, the ideas, words, and actions you took in life will live on in the generations that follow as an eternal testament to what you have done for all of humanity. In the time you had, you chose to use the talents at hand to shape the future and make the world a better place. Thank you again for being the inspiration, pioneer, and leader you were and the symbol you now have now become. Rest In Peace. (Christopher)

The (unrealised) hero within

As the hero is in all of us, the hero is the one who realises he has no self. A true hero, then, is one with the cosmos (Campbell 1949). One of the fans wrote in their farewell on Apple website how thanks to Steve Jobs they found direction in life. Interestingly, the fan says: ‘The freedom of the universe is now yours’. Not only does this tie in with heroeness as oneness with the cosmos, as Campbell sees it, but is also foregrounds freedom.

Steve, Your creative inspiration touched not millions but the entire world. You gave me direction and a life. (I’m guessing I’m not the only one). The freedom of the universe is now yours. (Steve from Rhode Island)

A source of inspiration to millions, Steve Jobs represents a possibility: if I put my mind to it, I, too, can succeed. A true sense of self-betterment arises as a form of hero worship.
Religiosity and the sacred in fannish consumption

An anonymous, ideological congregation

The social practices associated with fannish consumption, particularly after death when fandom moves on to be realised through memorialisation, shares with religious following many of the same characteristics. The deep emotional engagement and ritualistic revisitation of the sacred, personal meanings that continue to be drawn after death and holding the memory and the message as a ‘guiding light’ in one’s life mark the Jobs fandom as different from a mere hobby. Like any fandom, the fans form a heterogeneous group. As anyone can convene online, they commune in anonymity around the fan-produced artefacts that have come to function as digital shrines. The following video comment was made around September 2013, two years after Jobs’ passing and the creation of the video:

wow. it is touchy when we’re all listening to his voice again. thanks for made this video. (Hang Le)

Fans gather in online sites of mourning to share meanings and ideologies, to communally validate and continue their fandom, their fandom conversely validating the community. In the online context, anonymity is often named as a problematic aspect of communion and, consequently, authenticity is often questioned. However, gatherings with a religious orientation share with online fandom this element of anonymity. Sharing a strong affect-based cause or ideology, as illustrated by the quote above, is in itself enough to validate authenticity of emotion and motivation. Examining these social collectives as communities based on shared ideology and a set of beliefs with a hero figure at the centre of the mythological narrative, the structure and formation of both fannish and religious organisation presents in the same light. While it is the church where religion is practiced in addition the home, the online space offers similar opportunities for the expression of one’s beliefs and identity, while sharing the fannish consumption of the hero myth legitimises the practice.

Steve, you bring to all humanity the forbidden fruit of paradise: the Apple.
(Anonymous 3)

Not without humour, the fans exploit religious metaphors and figures of speech in their farewells. Religious motifs are a recurring element, the act of giving as one of the most prominent: Jobs is seen as a giver of many things, ranging from progress to humanity to wisdom on the nature of life and death.

Death

Death and the notion of eternal life are central in religious belief: Jesus, for example, died for our sins and gave us eternal life. He was sent to Earth by God and was working as God’s medium. In the fans’ sentiments of grief, we see them frame Jobs’ life as the work of God in that Jobs was the medium sent down to deliver a message or to give a gift:

I am so sorry. You are the best. Thank you for God who send you to us. (Seong-il)

Framing religion as a hero narrative, the gift given to the world by the hero was eternal life; life, according to religious doctrine, continues after death in the sacred realm, in Heaven. Death is not a terminal aspect of life, but a qualitative difference in existence (Eliade 1959 [1957]). In the fan narrative, Jobs’ person lives on, his identity being re-shaped in the process and in the
end, what is sacralised, and what is consumed in fandom, is an image (re)created rather than the
real individual Jobs once was.

A wonderful video of a great visionary and a deeply spiritual person. Steve Jobs
seemed to be most comfortable with Buddhism and eastern philosophy, the com-
ments made in this video reflect these beliefs and I am afraid that those who are
offended by this video just don’t get it. (Rajesh)

This further underlines that it is the meanings represented and embodied in him that are at the
root of the fandom; he is the hero personified, and the fans continue to work on their own iden-
tities and at the same time on the hero narrative of their remembrance. Death is what allows this
(re)creation and (re)construction. Religious narratives are also stories based on mythology,
written post-mortem, with meanings that symbolise life, death, moral code, social ties and co-
hesion, to name but a few.

Via their devices, the fans are closer to their hero figure: in a state of disbelief after his
death, some Jobs fans imagined he continued living as Siri, the speech function in iPhone, now
closer than ever, in the pocket. This further illustrates the spiritual dimensions of consumption
in memorialisation and fandom, and relates to the conception of death in religion: death is but
a qualitative change in existence, not termination of existence altogether. Eliade believes rites
of passage were invented so as to avoid the concept of death. Death is then seen as taking place
in the profane only, and life is seen as continuing in the sacred. People of religion attend the
church for continued relationship with the creator. Fans, too, in their memorialisation continue
to visit meanings while creating new ones. Drawing inspiration from Jobs’ life after his death,
the fans associate Jobs with all that is good and integrate this belief with their own actions.
The following is from the Apple memorial site:

Steve will be with us for all time in the best of our human spirit. (Ron)

Incorporating the meanings fans associate with their object of fandom and with their personal
ideology and outlook on life helps the fans carry the memory on as internalised belief. This way
he continues to live, but in a different mode: in the sacred realm. This way the fan reverence
as sacred devotion infiltrates the fans’ everyday lives and guides their action.

Threshold

Death marks a separation. In rituals, artificial boundaries are created to stand for a threshold to
the sacred. Sacred, for Eliade, is essentially in the experience (rather than representing an in-
herent quality of an object); he believed even the non-religious attach special meaning to some
places and times of personal significance, and therefore the sacred, to him, is not necessarily a
religious dimension. Rites of passage are often used as such artificially created threshold mo-
ments to signal and aid transition: to mark something as qualitatively different is to make real
the transition that follows. In order to gain access to the meanings Jobs represents after his
death, to feel close to him for the purposes of solace and inspiration, and more importantly, to
be able to do this repeatedly, fans assign special meaning to various artefacts thus sacralising
them. The commemorative video tributes act as such thresholds that are repeatedly visited in
order to attain an emotional space deemed sacred:

This keeps me going ... (Kay Lynn Gabaldon)

These threshold items become integral in the rituals and acts of remembrance as they help fans
access the desired mental state. We find examples of such use of items in the church, for ex-
ample, the rosaries used in Catholic faith.
Affective engagement and sacralisation

Technology infiltrates the fans’ lives and there is a strong element of puritanism regarding the brand. The reason, however, lies with the creator, not the brand per se: to the fans, the products are proof of his genius, the reward of his heroic journey and his gift to the world. Indeed, the technology validates his triumphant return and his status as a heroic persona. This message was posted on the Apple memorial site and illustrates the depth and breadth of engagement with technology. Also, the Apple technology is credited to Jobs: as the fan below shows, many address Jobs as ‘you’, in the second person instead of talking about him in the third person. This term of address further illustrates the personal nature of the fan relationship and the continued need to address Jobs using these terms even after his death.

Dear Steve, although I have never met you, I will in fact miss you. I feel like I have known you half my life, buying my first iPod 5gig as soon as they came out, getting the iMac back in ’99 and watching the Keynote videos annually. Your operating systems and innovative products have marked periods of my life and have allowed my creative side to develop through all you made possible. Steve, thank you for making my life more full, you were a great gift to the Earth. (Bob)

now that i write this letter using my mac book, which will then send this email wirelessly to you through my apple extreme, you [your] work will be remembered, even when i watch tv tonight i will use my apple tv and before i go to bed face time my 3 girls through my iphone 4, and i will then go to bed with music using my touch and then my work out in the morning with my nano. you changed that [the] world and man [made] life simpler and fun for all R.I.P. MR. Jobs. (Anonymous 4)

After his death, some fans reported that their devices had ‘lost some of the magic’. Others were concerned what would happen to the world now that Jobs was no longer here. Affective engagement is not only relative to products; many of the fans formed a deep personal and emotional bond with Jobs, even if he was a celebrity CEO they had never actually met. Watching the video tribute, this fan describes their feelings of loss in terms of death: the following comment illuminates the fans’ relationship with their fandom object as internalised, and as Sandvoss noted (2005), integrated with the sense of self. Including product information the fan wants to communicate his fandom and separate himself from mourners of non-fandom orientation:

When I found out Steve died I died a little and shed a tear. R.I.P Steve jobs, the father of technology – from my iPod 4g. (gankaru24)

References to family ties and sentiments of love are frequent in the fans’ farewells, as this message on the Apple memorial site shows:

Steve Jobs was the greatest and the smartest person alive on this planet. He has a special place in my heart. I will miss him a lot. I loved Steve Jobs, and today I’ve lost a member of my family. R.I.P Steve Jobs. (Arpit)

The emotional relationship is based on the benefits felt by the fans regarding their own personal development, inspired by the heroic tale of Steve Jobs’ life. Campbell (1949: 32) states that the successful outcome of the heroic journey is ‘the release of the flow of life into the body of the world’, a notion echoed in the religious motif of eternal life as a gift to humanity from above.
Consumption of religion, too, is emotionally invested and importance is placed on the reception of the gift, the eternal life. The memory of Jobs restores life to his fans in the form of a continued state of inspiration and hope even after his death, and to sustain it, the memory is given the form of a cultural narrative. Where heroes passed or where heroes were born, temples used to be erected (Campbell 1949) to mark the space of the sacred: the video tributes are the modern day version of the more glorious memorials.

**Ritualistic practices and (technologically) mediated religiosity**

In order to feel close to the hero, the fans engage with their devices ritualistically and frequently. It is not uncommon to have their house filled with Apple products. The fans describe feelings of unity and connection with Jobs when engaged with the products; they are in effect consuming his presence via proxy. Quoting Belk (1988: 157), Vander Veen (1994: 333) reminds us that relationships with objects are always three-way: person–thing–person. It seems natural to regard electronic devices, such as phones, as symbolic bridges connecting fans with their hero, producing a sense of intimacy. Such a three-way relationship holds for threshold items, too, and as Eliade theorised, they form a crucial part of experiencing the sacred as without them there is no boundary separating the profane from the sacred, no threshold granting access to the sacred. In rituals, artificial boundaries as thresholds are created, for example, rites of passage (Eliade 1959 [1957]). For the fans, threshold items are not limited to devices used in the everyday: commemorative videos may also function as a threshold to the sacred, prompting a strong affective response. They are material expressions of that which is sacred, the ideology embodied in the hero. Revisitations to these sites establish a ritual and render the social media sites into digital memorial sites:

Fantastic tribute to Jobs. Watching over and over again. (Bobby Brenman)

RIP Steve Jobs. We love you, this video always make me cry. (Anonymous 5)

In their practices of mourning, digital artefacts, fan productions and devices alike come to act as thresholds in the ritualistic engagement with the items, granting access to special emotional place. This mediation is not limited to remembrance, as this fan describes, but the whole relationship with the object of fandom is mediated by the very technology:

You know, I didn’t even know Mr Jobs and yet through his products, I feel like he’s a best friend. This video made me well up. RIP Mr Jobs, you will be very much missed by this world ... (Richard Davies)

**Identity and continued practice after death**

Religious belief is a part of one’s identity and integrates with the sense of self much in the same way as extreme fandom does (Sandvoss 2005). After the passing of a family member or an otherwise important person, a memorial service is organised to mark the death, to ritualistically honour the transition and to prepare the bereaved for their new social role in society as well as their new and modified identity and sense of self after the death (Romanoff and Terenzio 1998). However, as fandom is often seen as a peculiar form of interest and devotion, mourning for the loss of the object of fandom is not readily accepted, not even on the commemorative video sites:

this is fucking stupid. Go cry in a starbucks or something. (TehShewz)

Anti-fans as social critics and as morally superior invade the memorial space and cast their regularly anti-capitalism discourse and consumerism-related disdain on the fans engaged in
collective idolisation and positive mantra about the globally felt meaning of Jobs’ life and achievements. Framing their fandom in the positive and depicting Jobs as the hero of our times is a way to justify their hero-worshipping behaviour and devoutness of belief. It is in the collective acknowledgement of fandom and, more specifically, of grief that the fans continued identity as a fan after the death of Jobs is legitimised. The primary effect of the anti-fan invasion is a strengthened sense of unity among the fans as together they set out to defend their ideology and reverence. Having their fannish consumption trivialised and themselves being called delusional and consumerist, the fans defensive rhetoric ends to centre around notions of humanity as well as progress.

Forget YOU ABOVE ... mister whatever. Steve JOBs Rocks. He was a good soul and a genius. Listen to the words. I hope I can accomplish 1/8th as much in my life. I couldn’t come close to what he gave America and the world! What’s your problem? Self-reflect and change your life. Listen to his words of wisdom ... He’s a Good Soul and he’s in HEAVEN!!!!!!!!!!!!!! (mjhd592)

In addition to visionary genius and innovator, Jobs is viewed by many of his fans as a humanitarian. This, of course, is in stark opposition to the collective anti-capitalist views of the anti-fans.

**Discussion**

Death is not the final point for identity construction but it continues post-mortem (Bonsu and Belk 2003). The mythical hero lives on in the evolving narrative, and the identity of the fan evolves with it. In the process of recontextualisation and resemiotisation new meanings arise; the origin and type of meanings that are privileged offer insight on the meaning-making process and the prevailing ideology (Iedema 2003). Sandvoss (2005: 163) notes that the ‘intense semiotic productivity of fans […] confirm the increasingly reflective nature of fan texts’, underlining the notion that fandom is a self-reflective activity whereby the object of fandom is to be taken as a reflection of the self of the fan. This self-reflective relationship results in mutual change as the object of fandom ‘as medium of reflection gains the ability to shape the reflected self, [and] the ego reformulates the object’ (Sandvoss 2005: 162). We see the identity work as ongoing after death, fans appropriating the memory of Jobs, collectively negotiating and foregrounding the meanings they feel are the most significant to them. The constitutive role of the acts of remembrance in (re)making and (re)constructing history is documented by Jarvis (2011) in his research on 9/11 online memorialisation, and our analysis shows similar tendencies of creating, if not alternate, a heavily biased past.

As to mysticism and the source of religion and sacred texts, Cupitt (1998) argues there is nothing prior to language. He maintains ‘[t]here is no such thing as “experience”, outside of and prior to language’ (1998: 74). He goes on to state that language functions not to convey, but rather, to determine and form experience (1998: 74). We shape our experiences as we describe them: the same applies to (re)constructing memories and retelling the past. By choosing to privilege some meanings in memorialisation, others are unavoidably rejected. Sacred texts, too, have been drawn up after the fact, defining and shaping the experience.

Fans interpret the object of fandom through their own worldview; a phenomenon Sandvoss (2005) calls ‘fanalysis’. As a result, how the fans view the fandom object is dependent on their own existing ideologies. The ideological basis of the fan collective is thus reflected in the emerging characterisations of Jobs. In the face of the multitude of demands of today, fans gather around memorial artefacts as if these were emblems of individuality, to justify their personal choices and beliefs and to regain strength to follow through. ‘What would Steve do?’ was one fan’s mantra to get through the hard times. In its communality, the tribal conviction is also a very
personal one. The ideological discourse enacted by the fans is strongly individualistic, celebrating freedom and the courage to act on individual choice.

The heroic journey is very much a journey to the self. The difficulties we face, the metaphorical dragons we have to slay in order to get to our destination, all represent mental and psychological challenges we are to overcome if we desire to grow and change, to become all we can be. Campbell (1949) believes the All is in all of us, however, as it resides in the unconscious, and tapping to its potential poses a challenge. Myths in their allegorical nature, and rites of passage as celebrations of transition, illustrate the oneness that holds between the individual and the group, highlighting the great continuum of life where we are but a small part (Campbell 1949: 330–333). Myths help create social cohesion and offer a framework for understanding our lives, but more importantly they provide a window to the culture and a connection with the past.

Not everyone succeeds in becoming the hero of their wanting in their own life. As the fans worship their cultural hero, they reflect their hopes of personal attainment as they celebrate the great personal achievements of one individual, their hero. Drawing on the hero myth helps fans frame Jobs’ life in understandable terms and relate his life, career and death to their own lives. In the era where individualism is celebrated and consumers are seeking the lost connectedness as well as re-enchantment, witnessing a public person overcome their difficulties in both personal and working life with a triumphant finale speaks to many consumers’ hopes and desires. Moreover, the oppositional element woven into Jobs’ life story, succeeding despite apparently defying the norm, is testament to individualism and faith in one’s own abilities. It also foregrounds bravery: after all, the first task of the hero is to conquer fear (Campbell 1949). Even in the face of death the hero is to show no trace of fear. The seeds for the hero myth were sown in Stanford, if not earlier: addressing death in public and framing it as a ‘change agent’ that brings on positive change, Steve Jobs rhetorically took charge of the narrative of his life.

While what is sacralised in the fans’ consumption is the ideology represented by the hero, it is the self that is realised and produced in consumption (Firat 1991; Firat and Venkatesh 1995). The hero represents a possible self of the fan: as (based on Jung) Vander Veen (1994: 332) argues, the hero archetype is a reflection of the archetype of the self. What essentially is produced by the various acts of remembrance is the image of the hero within. As essential as this is for continued fandom, so it is for the identity and sense of self for the fan as consumer. The heroic journey of the fan object also provides a source of inspiration in the form of solace during one’s own struggles, and identifying with one’s hero may help the fan reach facets of the self they do not yet fully know they possess. As Campbell points out (1949: 337), ‘it is not society that is to guide and save the creative hero, but precisely the reverse’. Maybe, sometimes, it takes just one individual to unlock the potential of many.

References


*Online references*
