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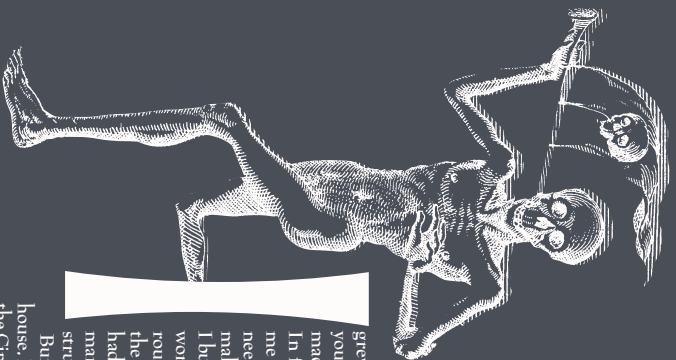
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playing with dead faces

I grew up playing with dead faces. It's true. In my youth I spent many hours designing deathly grimaces for a skull that my father gave me as a gift. In fact, I clearly remember the day he presented me with the skull and the other materials I would need to build dead human faces — moulding wax, make-up and sculpting tools. Hours would pass as I built noses, eyes, mouths and ears that were then worked onto the skull and blended into the surrounding waxy visage. I was particularly proud of the wounds I made, suggesting a horrible trauma had affected the decedent's face. These memories mark the heyday of my postmortem facial reconstruction years. I was between six and ten years old. Building dead faces was completely normal in my

house. My father, Ron Troyer, was a faculty member at the Cincinnati College of Mortuary Science during the 1980s and taught courses on cosmetology, facial reconstruction, restorative arts and the general preservation of the dead. He was also a funeral director for more than three decades in the states of Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, so I came by my interest in facial reconstruction the old-fashioned way — by asking my dad about his job. Indeed, both my parents recognized my youthful exuberance for making wax faces, so they never tried to stop me. The skull that my father gave me was a standard issue polyurethane 'teaching head' that mortuary science students used in their classes. The more gifted and talented students often built 'historical faces' and I clearly remember seeing busts of Abraham Lincoln and Fagin from *Oliver Twist* in what I called the college's dead head cabinet. It was really just a storage closet with shelves in which students kept their reconstructive projects between classes. I loved staring into the waxy gazes of those multiple free-floating faces on visits to the college.

It seemed only natural, then, that I received my own restorative arts skull, a box of moulding wax, and the tools to start building faces. I vividly remember working with the wax to make my art class skull 'come alive' with a dead face.

I could not know it then, but those dead faces and my childhood hobby would help shape my own career development. As it happens, I am the Director of the University of Bath's Centre for Death and Society, the world's only interdisciplinary research centre that focuses on death, dying and the dead body. I specialize on the connections between the dead body and technology (old, new, speculative).

I was no child savant who took facial reconstruction wax and transformed it into an Anatomical Venus, complete with Play-doh organs. I never achieved anything like the 18th-century anatomical waxes on display at La Specola in Florence, or came close to the contemporary waxwork artistry of Eleanor Crook, a proper artist whose lectures and demonstrations on repairing anatomical wax figures always remind me of my youth.

What working with wax did teach me was that in death, most people's faces could be transformed. The entire concept of a 'dead face' changed as I worked the lips into a smile or tried leaving one eye open and one closed. The eyes were always the trickiest anatomical structure for me, since creating a lifelike open eyeball with wax and makeup requires real skill. Decades later I would learn about taxidermists using glass eyeballs for animal mounts and think to myself — if only I'd had those for my waxy dead faces.

Twenty years later, during my PhD research on 19th-century postmortem preservation technologies (photography, embalming, taxidermy, etc.), I realized that my childhood skull was itself part of a long tradition in the handling of dead bodies that changed how 'dead' a dead body looked. During the Industrial Revolution in the US, in the mid-19th century, funeral practices used many new mechanical tools to modify human biology. In particular, the development of postmortem photography and of reproducible mechanical-chemical embalming radically altered the modern way of death. An image of a person soon after death could be captured so that they looked 'asleep' while chemically preserving a dead body delayed organic decomposition for extended periods of time.

By technologically removing dead bodies from the everyday experience of human time, 19th-century preservationists unintentionally created a new problem for post-industrial humans — how natural or normal do these preserved faces look? Do we recognize the deceased in death or is this new dead face a poorly crafted shock to the senses? How 'dead' are dead people supposed to look now? What is a dead face supposed to look like anyway?

My childhood experience of using simple tools to create wax faces eventually opened my adult eyes to how difficult it is to make the dead look real but also

a little less dead. I say this as a person who grew up around more dead bodies than I can count, and who paid close attention to the cosmetic and facial work done by my father on his own dead parents, Grandma and Grandpa Troyer were most certainly dead at their funerals, but they looked good in their caskets. I will go so far as to say that they looked better dead than in the days leading up to their deaths.

A key part of my research focuses on the future of dead body preservation and postmortem restorative arts, since the rationale supporting any preservative process will eventually change, as it did when embalming became common during the 19th and 20th centuries. In the 19th century, early American embalmers focused on germ theory and hygiene to rationalize the process, by the 20th century embalming came to embrace the cosmetic enhancement of the dead. Legitimate critiques of the use of embalming emerged during its earliest days, and those have never disappeared. Critics argue that chemical embalming is unnecessary, bad for the environment, unnatural, and an invasive process that disconnects grieving family members from the true face of death.

I often remind those working on all sides of the preservation debate that while current embalming technology has been used in roughly the same form for the last 150 years, it too will change. At this juncture in modern, First World death practices, I expect to see the development of new preservation systems that are relatively chemically free, non-invasive and semi-permanent. I have no idea who or whom will create these new tools, but the traditional restorative arts used to preserve dead faces are due for an upgrade. What will not change, I think, is the underlying desire of many people to see their deceased loved one dead, but not too dead.

The art and science of dead body preservation was never about using only one technology; it involved a mixture of tools and concepts. Just as 21st-century digital scans of dead bodies for families that do not want any kind of invasive postmortem examination are slowly replacing the anatomical autopsy, so digital overlays might reconstruct dead faces without using any kind of wax, cosmetics or preservative chemicals. Think of this speculative technology as a new kind of digital death mask.

I still have the skull. It is a prized memento mori possession that moves with me no matter where I live. I almost lost it during the mid-1980s when some neighborhood kids created a Haunted House for Halloween but I managed to get it back. The skull currently sits on a shelf in my house and constantly reminds me of where I have been in my life, and what I will eventually become.

Dance of Death, Josef Feuncker, 1010
 postmortem 515 27 24 11 19 18 5 7 19 10 11
 Feuncker designed two of the three hand-drawn movie posters. His recognizable style drew largely on German Expressionism combined with a flair of aesthetic decadence. Written by Fritz Lang, *Feuncker* is considered by the Internet Movie Database to be "the best film in which a beautiful dancer's sexual allure-