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Coluche and Posthumous Celebrity: Competing and Consensual Media Discourses

Abstract

The French comic, actor and humanitarian Coluche represents an important and enduring example of celebrity in contemporary France, yet little academic attention has been paid particularly to his posthumous significance. A detailed survey of French press and television coverage over the last decade reveals competing media discourses concerning his importance as a source of nostalgia, accusations of vulgarity and racism in his work, and his portrayal in the 2008 biopic *Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec*. At the same time, coverage generates more consensual representations of Coluche - as an ordinary and extraordinary star, a political activist, an LGBTQ-friendly figure, a representative of a French biker culture based on social solidarity, a distinguished public figure worthy of comparison with other well-known individuals, a subject for impersonation, and a source of inspiration to other performers. In addition, Coluche's case study indicates possible media-specific approaches to the representation of posthumous celebrity.

The comic, actor and humanitarian Coluche (born Michel Colucci, 1944-86) represents a particularly prominent and enduring example of posthumous celebrity within contemporary French popular culture. In 1985, just a few months before his tragic death in a motorcycle accident, Coluche launched Les Restaurants ('Restos') du Coeur, initially as a food-distribution charity, calling upon the singer-songwriter Jean-Jacques Goldman to write and release a charity single 'La Chanson des Restos' (1986). Three years later in 1989 six well-established figures of the French popular music scene, known as Les Enfoirés, named after one of Coluche's comic insults/catchwords, embarked on a tour to raise money for the charity. Since 1992 the televised Enfoirés concert has taken place annually, featuring a large number of performers, accompanied by CD/DVD releases and downloads, and backed by extensive media coverage, which contributes towards maintaining Coluche's profile in France. Coluche's tragic death came just a few months after that of another popular French humanitarian figure, the singer-songwriter Daniel Balavoine, who was killed in a helicopter crash in January 1986 during attempts to supply water pumps to villages in Mali as part of the Paris du Coeur programme, designed to make use of the logistical resources of the Paris-Dakar Rally.

Coluche is the subject of many press articles often written in response to various events such as anniversaries of his death¹ and other forms of commemoration, as well as film and book releases. Press coverage has also situated him at the centre of various disputes over ownership of his image and his work concerning, for example, the wording of the title of Antoine de Caunes' 2008 biopic *Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec*, the use of Gaston Bergeret's 1985 photo portrait of Coluche in publicity material for Les Restos du Coeur, and the payment of recording royalties.² Coluche has also been the focus of several television programmes of various genres, particularly documentaries, variety and talk shows, which include archive news footage relating to his key actions and initiatives: his joke candidacy for the 1981 presidential election and subsequent withdrawal; his 1985 radio appearance on Europe 1 suggesting the creation of what was to become *Les Restos du Coeur*; in 1986 the release of the charity single 'La Chanson des Restos', his meeting with L'Abbé Pierre during which he handed over a cheque for 1.5 million francs to the Emmaüs charity, and his appearance at the European Parliament in Strasbourg when he successfully campaigned for EU food surpluses to be donated to associations like Les Restos du Coeur; and his campaign for tax relief on charitable donations leading to the Coluche law (1988). Television programmes also feature interviews with celebrities and members of the public (studio and vox pop), as well as programmes based on compilations of his sketches.³ In addition, Coluche's achievements are featured in the special discussion and debate programmes that usually follow the annual televised *Enfoirés* concert. These not only explain and promote Les Restos du Coeur, but also historicise, contextualise and mythologise Coluche as well as Les Restos du Coeur and Les Enfoirés (Tinker 2017).

Despite Coluche's popularity, there has been relatively little academic discussion of his cultural significance. Steven Ungar's 1996 book chapter provides a sense of his evolving and increasingly complex, even contradictory, media and screen persona and audience reception during his lifetime. Ungar locates Coluche from the mid-1970s until his death within the French tradition of the *râleur* ('malcontent, grumbler', 262), as he gains not only 'a cult following on the French left as well as among a generation of adolescents, former *soixante-huitards*', but also a 'following' on 'the conservative and reactionary right, among others, who relished his persona of *râleur* with little or even no irony' (261-262). Indeed, Ungar argues that two of Coluche's 1974 sketches - 'Histoire d'un mec sur le pont d'Alma' and 'Je me marre' - 'portray a "normal" white *râleur* whose attitudes concerning race, ethnicity, and identity bear strong affinity with the figure of Pierre Poujade' (264). Ungar also observes that Coluche's subsequent 1981 candidacy for French President further demonstrated 'an ability to satirize the prejudices of the chauvinist *meç*' (264). Furthermore, Ungar describes how Coluche, in his later film role as Lambert in Claude Berri's *Tchao Pantin* (1983),

‘exuded a fatalism’ and was ‘less of a (“normal”) rôleur’ but rather a ‘loser’ (paumé) reminiscent of Bardamu’ in Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* as well as Jean Gabin’s ‘tough-and tender’ roles and ‘poetic realist persona’ (Pépé le Moko; *La Bête humaine*) (264-265). Indeed, Ungar observes that Coluche’s Lambert ‘turns out to be something more or other than the *mec* or *paumé* he first appears to be’, given that ‘identity in postcolonial France is layered, unstable, and not always what it appears to be’ (266).

In French-language academic accounts, Nasseridine Aït Ouali’s doctoral study (2012, 2016) addresses the lack of academic research on Coluche particularly through a diachronic study of his body of work, focusing on its various ‘enunciative positions’, political discourses relating to institutions such as the police, army, school, church, civil service and media, and key themes such as war and racism. The posthumous publication of his work is also viewed as particularly complex in terms of authorship. Furthermore, Nelly Quemener situates Coluche within a largely male-dominated comedy scene in France from the 1970s to the 1990s (2012, 139), emphasising his role as ‘le bouffon blanc populaire’ (Quévieux 2012, 112), his emphasis on ‘surveillance’, ‘dénonciation’ and ‘provocation’ - an approach regarded as ‘anarchiste’ (Quemener 2017, 65), his targeting of the political elite and the bourgeoisie (Quemener 2011), and his role as ‘outsider’ (Quemener 2017, 63), beyond or above the French political scene (61), describing himself as ‘coluchiste’, ‘plus subversif que politique’ (65). In particular, Quemener associates Coluche as well as fellow comic Thierry Le Luron with targeting the figure of the ‘« franchouillard » raciste’, the ‘Français moyen, incarnant un mélange de fierté nationale et de racisme’ (61), while arguing that this figure is ‘un terrain de négociation de la masculinité blanche et de défense implicite de son hégémonie’, given its failure to ‘désigner les mécanismes présidant à la production sociale de la race’ (61-62).

While such studies contribute to our understanding of Coluche especially as a living celebrity, academic accounts of his posthumous image are lacking. Nevertheless, press reviews of the various television documentaries devoted to Coluche produced since his death highlight several desirable qualities of media coverage such as completeness (Guérin), a richness of reflection (Sasportas), a balance between tribute and criticism (Mandel), and a questioning of hagiographical approaches (Barraco; Guérin).

Where the representation of posthumous celebrity in the media is concerned more generally, existing academic accounts have so far tended to focus on film or music stars.⁴ For Cath Davies, such media coverage ‘acts as an effective summation of the construction of [the] star persona when alive,

whilst also signalling the development of [a] posthumous media image' (2012, 193). Posthumous celebrity also emphasises the production of new meaning. As Davies comments, 'Death not only evokes a probing of the past (the life prior to the death) but also generates a meaning in itself' (2012, 184). The generation of posthumous meaning is indeed endless, as James Bennett and Sean Redmond, following Lisa Bode (2014), describe 'celebrity, and its study' as 'an ongoing, "living" process' (2014, 3). Joli Jensen views the study of posthumous celebrity as particularly complex and multifaceted: 'a democratized participation in reading the present and the past, in finding commonality, in exploring anonymity and fame, in connecting across time and space, race, class, and ethnicity, and - all along - recognizing the constructedness of the interpretative process' (2005: xxii). Certain discourses of posthumous celebrity are stronger than others, which are neglected, forgotten or repressed. For Landon Palmer (2013, 384), drawing on the work of Richard Dyer (1979), 'Posthumous or late-career reflections on star images often involve formal acts of encapsulation, typically through imparting a preferred narrative or discrete career contributions that obscure other potential "meanings and effects"' (Dyer 1979, 3; Palmer 2013, 384). Indeed, as Jensen observes, 'Posthumous reputation is clearly a contested process, one that is continually being negotiated with and against mass mediation' (xviii; see also ix). For Jensen, competing discourses serve to dynamise and complexify the celebrity in death and avoid reductionism: 'Death [...] both constrains and enables the ability of the celebrity to "speak." [...] But without contradiction, or maturation by a living figure, the posthumous celebrity is constrained by the ever-simplifying story hook he or she has become' (xxi). Finally, fans, families and journalists are identified as having distinct roles in the production of posthumous celebrity: 'Families seek to fix a particular public image, while fans seek to define the celebrity in ways [...] that honor what they see in them, while journalists both comment on this interpretive process and seek to deepen and complexify, or supercede, these different portrayals, while scholars seek to analyze and explain them' (xix).

Following an online database search of the French press (Factiva), for the most part regional newspaper titles, and television archive research at Inathèque in Paris, drawing on the main national free-to air channels, this article focuses on media texts that identify Coluche as their primary subject, covering a period from 2005 - the twentieth anniversary of the creation of the Restos du Coeur - to 2016 - the thirtieth anniversary of Coluche's death. The media texts consulted certainly illustrate how posthumous media coverage of Coluche generates the kind of competing discourses to which Jensen refers. Such discourses focus on Coluche's significance as a source of nostalgia, the accusations of vulgarity and racism that were levelled at his work during his lifetime, and his representation in the 2008 biopic *Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec*. However, posthumous media

coverage also generates more fixed, consensual representations of Coluche: as an ordinary and extraordinary star, the political activist behind the Restos du Coeur and the Coluche law, an LGBTQ-friendly figure, the embodiment of a French biker culture based on social solidarity, a public figure worthy of comparison with a variety of other well-known individuals, and a subject for impersonation and a source of inspiration.

Competing Discourses

Object of Nostalgia

Coverage of Coluche expresses a sense of loss, or what Fred Davis refers to as first-order or simple nostalgia, which ‘harbors the largely unexamined belief that things were better (more beautiful) (healthier) (happier) (more civilised) (more exciting) than than now’ (1979, 18). A lengthy 2006 *Nouvel Observateur* article, ‘En quoi Coluche manque à la France ?’ (Bounemoura et al.) draws negative comparisons between Coluche and today’s generation of comics who are found wanting or unable to match his various qualities: ferocity, humour, charisma, fearlessness, cheekiness, speed, intelligence, as well as his ability to comment on contemporary life, recognise and solve problems, build consensus, and unite people. In television coverage Coluche is sorely missed (*Coluche (Nous nous sommes tant aimés)*) and regarded as never having left the French collective consciousness (*Coluche, l’ami public numéro un*). However, while Coluche combined comedy and activism in a particularly innovative way, the view that he is the sort of comic currently lacking in France is somewhat simplistic, given subsequent generations of successful politicised stand-up comedy performers, notably in *Le Jamel Comedy Club* (2006-09), which, as Nelly Quemener observes, tackled issues of diversity and paved the way for ‘new ethnicities’, a more complex and less marginalised view of minorities, and a greater emphasis on multiple identities (2014, 87).

Media coverage also draws negative comparisons between Coluche’s era and the present. For the actor and comic François-Xavier Demaison, Coluche was ‘un mec qui n’a pas peur’, while ‘aujourd’hui on a tous peur’ (Bourgeot); the actor and comic Eric Judor describes how Coluche’s material would be deemed unacceptable today, given the criticism Judor and his fellow humourist Ramzy Bédia suffered following their jokes at the expense of the town of Saint-Nazaire (Perrin); and the actor Mathilda May regrets the absence of Coluche’s own nose-thumbing humour, a perceived lack of innovation in contemporary humour and a reliance on imitation (*Coluche, une mort sans réponse*). More generally, the journalist Stéphane Bern observes the reduced scope of humour in contemporary France (Bounemoura et al. 2006); the comic and actor Josiane Balasko regrets the

current consensual times and lack of contestation (*Coluche, l'ami public numéro un*); and the cartoonist Pierre Wiazemsky (Wiaz) describes a tribalised society in which the mockery of others is forbidden (Bounemoura et al. 2006). In a 2018 interview in *Libération*, the political scientist Denis Ramond effectively disputes such views of humour and censorship in France as simplistic :

Encore faut-il étudier plus finement les différents types d'humour que ne le font ces gens de mauvaise foi qui clament qu'on «ne peut plus rien dire», que «Desproges et Coluche, eux...». Ce qui est stupide. Il y a des blagues racistes antiracistes et il y a des blagues racistes racistes. Et il n'y a jamais eu d'ambiguïté avec ces deux humoristes.» (Tion and Beauvallet, 2018).

Coverage also includes speculations as to Coluche's personal preoccupations had he still been alive today : 'la guerre en banlieue, l'affaire Clearstream, Ben Laden, la saga des footeux friqués, la grippe aviaire, la «Star Ac'»' (Paris) ; 'Quelle blague Coluche aurait-il faite sur des barbus qui dégomment des civils et des dessinateurs qui caricaturent? Comment serait-il intervenu dans le débat sur un Dieudonné, qui dérape, et sur un Conseil d'Etat de la République qui, un janvier 2014, interdit un de ses spectacles?'(presenter Didier Varrod in *Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*).

Certain commentaries in the *Nouvel Observateur* article 'En quoi Coluche manque à la France ?' (Bounemoura et al. 2006) challenge such 'simple nostalgia', corresponding to Fred Davis's second-order or reflexive nostalgia, whereby the individual raises 'questions concerning the truth, accuracy, completeness or representativeness of the nostalgic claim' (1979, 21). For example, Laurent Joffrin, editor of *Le Nouvel Observateur*, expresses criticism of Coluche's denigration of the political class. While the actor and comic Kad views Coluche as worthy of recognition, he prefers to focus on new and current generations of comics. Television coverage around the thirtieth anniversary of Coluche's death is particularly questioning of 'simple nostalgia', featuring mixed or less than favourable views. The humourist Anne Roumanoff describes her lack of appreciation for Coluche's radio work and appearances on Canal+ dressed as a woman, yet is visibly moved when recounting her own experience of singing on stage at an Enfoirés concert with a giant portrait of Coluche behind her as a backdrop (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). The entertainer Patrick Sébastien also describes how on occasion Coluche 'n'était pas gentil comme tout le monde', and how he was disliked by many and had indeed received several death threats (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). Jean-Michel Vaguey, one of Coluche's collaborators and friends describes his unease as a member of Coluche's coterie (*Coluche, Le Luron : morts de rire*). The documentary *Coluche, Le Luron : morts de rire* also features

archive voxpop interviews describing him in negative terms as ‘lourd’, ‘bébête’ and ‘pas une vedette’; and with similarly unfavourable comments: ‘ça m’amuse pas ces conneries’ [...] ‘Il parle, il parle.’ [...] ‘On comprend pas ce qu’il dit’.

In addition to ‘simple’ and ‘reflexive’ forms of nostalgia, the *Nouvel Observateur* article features what Davis terms third-order or interpreted nostalgia, which ‘moves beyond issues of the historical accuracy or felicity of the nostalgic claim on the past and, even as the reaction unfolds, questions and, potentially at least, renders problematic the very reaction itself’ (1979, 24). For instance, *Coluche’s* former wife Veronique Colucci highlights the futility of speculating how Coluche would have reacted to present day situations, and Romain Bouteille (actor and co-founder with Coluche of the Café de la Gare) resists a process of canonisation in France, which serves as a distraction from more important matters and is symptomatic of social distinction.

Charges of Vulgarity and Racism

Television coverage focuses in particular on accusations of vulgarity in Coluche’s work, citing, for example, a 1985 VSD opinion poll which revealed that while 55% of the public found Coluche ‘sympathique’, 70% indeed found him vulgar (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). In a television interview Patrick Sébastien comments that ‘half of France’ found Coluche vulgar, given his sexual references ‘comme si la vulgarité était dans “bite”, “couilles” et “chatte”’ (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). Television coverage cites verbal attacks from prominent journalists during Coluche’s lifetime, for example, Renaud Matignon who described Coluche as the ‘Rimbaud du pipi caca’; Louis Pauwels, for whom Coluche did not represent the people but ‘la canaille, l’inculte, le laid, le bête, le méchant’; and Jacques Derogy who described the comic as ‘un idéologue de la chienlit [qui] ne fait plus rire tout le monde’ (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*; see also *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*). The journalist and humourist Daniel Morin, recounting his earliest memories of watching television, describes how his family found Coluche vulgar (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). However, television coverage also questions or refutes accusations of vulgarity. Defining the term ‘vulgarité’ as ‘une forme d’obscénité, d’impudeur’, the journalist and humourist Didier Porte considers Coluche’s material in contrast as ‘revigorant et de bon aloi’ (*Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi*). The presenter Virginie Guilhaume describes Coluche’s use of language as ‘grossier’ but ‘jamais vulgaire’ (*Spéciale Coluche (les rois du rire)*; *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*), a view expressed by the footballer Michel Platini in interview (*Coluche: l’ami public numéro un*) and supported by Aït Ouali in his doctoral thesis (2012, 376). For the journalist Laurence Remila, speaking in interview, Coluche’s so-called vulgarity actually refers to a newer style, which is more ‘spoken’ and less ‘written’ than that used by earlier comics, exposing

general audiences to the kind of anarchist culture found in the satirical magazines *Hara-Kiri* or *Charlie Hebdo* (*Spécial Coluche (Personne ne bouge)*). Véronique Colucci also affirms in a further interview that Coluche was ‘d’une grande délicatesse’, ‘outrancier’ but not vulgar (Coluche, 30 ans déjà).

Accusations of racism in Coluche’s work are also raised and challenged in television coverage through various lines of reasoning. A 2016 Arte documentary (*Spécial Coluche*) features his own direct denial: ‘Il y a des gens que j’aime et des gens que j’aime pas. Je fais pas de différence personnellement entre un imbécile français et un imbécile africain, tu vois, mais dans les deux cas, je ne les aime pas.’ Rémila observes that Coluche was operating within a system without clear guidelines: ‘Quand il parlait de noir, d’arabe, il testait certaines limites, il tentait des trucs parce que tous les codes autour de ces questions-là n’étaient pas établies comme aujourd’hui’ (see also Perfetti, 2016a). The journalist Philippe Vandel emphasises the difference between Coluche’s approach to minorities in general during his lifetime and more contemporary preoccupations with political correctness: ‘Coluche défendait les minorités sans être politiquement correct. Je rappelle que le politiquement correct c’est de jamais s’attaquer à une minorité. Ils les défendait toutes en les attaquant toutes’. Another 2016 documentary, *Coluche, déjà 30 ans* (TF1), emphasises Coluche’s general opposition to acts of stupidity. As he states in his own words, ‘Les personnages que je représente sont laids, ils sont cons [...] je ne joue que des cons parce que moi j’ai le sentiment que le mal du siècle, c’est la connerie’, while the voice-over narration defines Coluche’s guiding principle: ‘bousculer les Français en leur renvoyant au visage leurs propres défauts. Un regard acerbe sur la France, comme aucun humoriste n’avait osé le faire avant lui’. While several media accounts serve to challenge charges of racism, an article in *L’Est Républicain* asks explicitly whether some of Coluche’s comments and aphorisms would be acceptable today to individuals or associations seeking to combat racism, homophobia and anti-semitism (‘Coluche pourrait-il le dire aujourd’hui?’).

Cinematic Subject

The 2008 biopic *Coluche, l’histoire d’un mec* provides a further pretext for differences of opinion concerning Coluche’s reputation. In an article featuring a series of sound-bites from vox pop interviews, the film is referred to as ‘un sujet “casse-gueule”’ (Vavasseur). A television review in *Ouest France* declares, ‘le film n’enjolive pas le personnage’ (“Vu l’amer jeu de rôle de Coluche.”). Certain critics and commentaries regret the film’s ‘vision délibérément partielle’ (Creutz), while Coluche’s son Romain describes it as a ‘version étriquée des faits’ (Grasset and Lizé), and it is

reported that Coluche's former wife Véronique wishes to avoid reliving what was a sad period (Grasset and Lizé). In response to the criticisms, the director Antoine de Caunes develops a complex account of his film: '[...] arguant que son film n'était "ni une hagiographie ni une entreprise de déstabilisation" mais "un film indépendant" qu'il a "fait avec l'envie que les gens aiment encore plus Coluche après l'avoir vu"' (Moisan).

Towards Consensus

'Star-as-Ordinary' and 'Star-as-Special'

While media coverage generates competing discourses around Coluche, more fixed and consensual accounts appear, firstly relating to his star status. While stars are traditionally "'set apart from ordinary men" [sic] encapsulating "exceptional qualities"' (Weber 1968 cited in Dyer [1979] 1992, 35; Davies 191), they may also represent 'ordinary qualities'— they are both star-as-special' and 'star-as-ordinary', to use Richard Dyer's terms (1979/1998, 43). Posthumous media coverage of Coluche highlights his ordinary, unremarkable, if not at times difficult, upbringing in Montrouge, in the southern Parisian suburbs, identified as his home town ('ville de son enfance') (Rouzé; 'Vingt-cinquième anniversaire'; *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*). Press accounts paint his childhood in relative poverty following the loss of his father at the age of three and detail the groups of friends that he formed. Coluche's personal story as a teenager, including spells of delinquency, is said to epitomise the collective identity of Montrouge ('Le gamin de Montrouge'). Coluche is also represented as remaining faithful to his home town and his former poverty (Médioni). Indeed, we are informed that his final resting place following his death in 1986 is Montrouge cemetery (Rouzé). The association between Coluche and Montrouge has been maintained in reports on the unveiling of a statue in June 2011 (his characteristic dungarees cast in bronze) as a tribute by the town to his memory, located near the Emile-Boutroux quartier where he grew up (Bernatas; Boutin ; Pelloli; 'Une statue pour Coluche'). Reports also mention a 'centre socioculturel' (Espace Michel Colucci) in Montrouge, which takes his name (Bossaert). In television coverage of the thirtieth anniversary of Coluche's death, his close personal friend Fabienne Bilal identifies Coluche's attachment to his social origins and identification with his audiences as factors informing his brand of comedy :

C'est une façon de leur dire, "Je vous connais. Je suis comme vous. Je viens de là où vous êtes. J'ai pas oublié, j'y suis toujours. Je suis... je ne serai jamais que l'un d'entre eux. Mais

c'est pas une raison. Elevez-vous. Voilà. Essayez de penser autrement. Peut-être que si je me moque de vous ça va vous faire bouger" (*Coluche, déjà 30 ans*).

In contrast with such representations of ordinary beginnings, posthumous media coverage also represents Coluche in hagiographical terms as a distinct, special, extraordinary star. As Davies comments with reference to newspaper coverage of Michael Jackson's death, 'The need to re-inscribe extraordinariness within traditional characteristics of stardom is endemic of the construction of star personas in death' (193). The developing *cafés-théâtres* around the areas of Montparnasse and Les Halles are identified as the places that allowed Coluche, and other young actors of his generation, to move from the 'anonymity' of Montrouge towards a life of 'celebrity' (*Coluche, 30 ans déjà; 'Le gamin de Montrouge'*). The documentary *Coluche, 30 ans déjà* indeed conveys his drive and ambition to achieve distinction.

Specific qualities are highlighted by television presenters and commentators: Coluche is the symbol of a generation (*Spéciale Coluche (Les Rois du rire)*); a childhood hero (*Hommage à Coluche*); an 'enfant de mai 68' and figure of 'contestation' (*Coluche, une mort sans réponse*); a purveyor of verbal irony or 'le deuxième degré' when dealing with issues such as racism (*Coluche, l'ami public numéro un*); a politically subversive 'bouffon qui a fait peur aux gens' (*Coluche: un clown ennemi d'Etat*), given his joke candidacy for the French presidency;⁵ and an enemy of the political class: for Pierre Bénichou, the Right regarded Coluche as dangerous; the Left as something of a 'beauf'/'-poujadiste' (*Hommage à Coluche (Les Grands du rire)*). In Bounemoura et al.'s aforementioned 2006 article, various public figures (celebrities from the entertainment industry, journalists, politicians, writers, representatives of associations and charities) identify Coluche with a host of personal qualities and skills, for example, freedom, courage, insolence, leadership, tenderness, commitment, anger, his role as the people's voice and his taboo-breaking and limitless humour. For Myriam Perfetti (2016a) Coluche reinvented 'l'humour politique et la générosité civique'. Coluche is viewed as irreplaceable ('Anne Roumanoff le dit'; 'Coluche, révolutionnaire'; Dague; 'Irremplaçable Coluche'; Perfetti 2016a; "Trente ans après"). Presenting an unusually thematic, rather than chronological, view of Coluche's life and work, the documentary *Coluche: le bouffon devenu roi* identifies four areas of distinction: he is the 'roi de la scène', 'roi de la provoc', 'roi du cinéma' and the 'roi des marginaux'. Coluche is also represented in television coverage in the kind of superlative terms associated with stardom (Dyer 1979/1998, 43, following Violette Morin 1963) as one of France's most enduringly popular figures: 'le comique préféré des Français' (*Spéciale Coluche (26*

minutes pour rire)); ‘l’humoriste qui manque le plus aux Français’ (‘Coluche, l’histoire d’un mec ou plus exactement’); a ‘national icon’ (*Coluche, l’ami public numéro un*).

While television coverage refers to Coluche’s personal problems in his private life, particularly financial difficulties following his presidential candidacy, including drug-taking, the breakdown of his marriage (‘longue descente aux enfers’) (*Coluche (Nous nous sommes tant aimés)*; see also *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*) and the suicide of his close friend the film actor Patrick Dewaere, his comeback and perceived return to form, particularly following his leading role in *Tchao Pantin* and best actor award in the 1984 Césars, are presented as notable achievements (*Coluche: l’ami public numéro un ; Spécial Coluche (les rois du rire)*). Coluche’s distinction is also emphasised in television coverage via repeated reference to the heavily mediated public outpouring of grief following his death, which repeatedly includes the poignant line that Jacques Attali delivered during the funeral service: ‘Salut ma poule’ (e.g. *Coluche (Nous nous sommes tant aimés)*; *Hommage à Coluche (Vivement Dimanche)*; *Coluche, une mort sans réponse*).

Social and Political Activist

Television coverage represents Coluche as what Dyer terms the ‘politically conscious rebel’ (Dyer 1992, 52). In the *Marianne* news magazine Myriam Perfetti (2016a) expresses thanks to Coluche on the thirtieth anniversary of his death, including a tribute from the street artists Zag and Sia, who painted his portrait the length of stairs on rue Lemaignan in Paris (14th arrondissement), as well as a list of Coluche’s aphorisms under various headings (‘gouverner’; ‘manifestations et syndicats’; ‘racisme et immigration’; ‘les affaires politiques’; ‘les élections’), which are deemed to be still relevant today.

Coverage also situates Coluche in terms of relatively open and playful attitudes towards gender and sexuality in France. Repeated reference is made to the mock wedding ceremony on 25 September 1985 involving Coluche dressed as the bride and Thierry Le Luron as the groom, surrounded by drag queens. Taking place just three days before the wedding of the famous French newscaster Yves Mourousi to fellow journalist Véronique Audemard d’Alançon, the mock wedding has also been interpreted as a criticism of the ‘surmédiatisation’ of this celebrity wedding (Bodin 2014; *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*) and as an allusion to Mourousi’s undisclosed homosexuality (‘Coluche pour le meilleur et pour le rire’; Chiche 2011; *Spécial Coluche (Personne ne bouge)*) (see also Quemener 2014, 49-50). This media stunt is attributed to Coluche’s personal taste for ‘farce’ and his role as the ‘trublion de service’ (Florin) and is considered ‘un énorme pied de nez aux conventions’ (Jean-Luc Wachthausen in Bounemoura et al.). The mock wedding has also been viewed, albeit quite simplistically and with

the benefit of hindsight, as a very early contribution to debates regarding the legalisation of gay marriage in France ('Coluche, ici et maintenant'). An article in an issue of *Star Fan* magazine devoted to Coluche presents him in terms of relatively open attitudes towards homosexuality, referring to a specific incident in which he considered accepting the advances of a man he met while hitchhiking before deciding that he was not interested ('Le gamin de Montrouge').

While similarly recognising the mock wedding episode as parody and denunciation of the mediated marriage of Mourousi and Audemard d'Alençon and as an early reference to gay marriage, Quemener also views it as an apolitical form of entertainment, which reintroduces a distinction between the serious and the comic as well as between politics and buffoonery; as including an visible audience of gay men and cross-dressers at a time when the AIDS crisis was reactivating gay stereotypes; and as 'l'ultime source de provocation pour le bouffon en perte de vitesse et de pouvoir, qui voit sa masculinité confortée par l'échec à incarner la féminité (2014, 49-51; see also Quemener 2012, 152-153).

Press coverage associates Coluche with social solidarity more generally via his personal passion for motorcycling, riding skills and his collection of vehicles, which appear on public display from time to time, for example, his Yamaha 750 cm³ ('La moto de Coluche a trouvé') and the Yamaha OW31 with which he became a world speed record holder in 1985 (Grasso, 7 October 2014). While such coverage corresponds with well-established stereotypes of rich and famous male stars indulging in expensive, adventurous and potentially dangerous leisure pursuits, the male camaraderie with fellow bikers and personal friendships that Coluche developed through motorcycling are also emphasised ('Le gamin de Montrouge'), notably through recollections of the group of bikers who acted as pall-bearers at his funeral ('Le gamin de Montrouge'; interview with Frédéric Taddeï in Bounemoura et al.). The association between Coluche and motorbiking takes on a further social, charitable and humanitarian dimension in newspaper coverage of bike runs organised by various motorcycle groups in France such as la Fédération des motards en colère (FFMC), le Moto club des Halles de Mamers and les Motards ont du Coeur, in support of the Restos du Coeur charity. Such coverage associates Coluche with the kind of key features of motorcycle rallies identified by Valérie Delignières and Hervé Regnaud (2009): responsibility, altruism, road safety and moderation of speed, which contrast with the stereotypical rebellious image and demeanour long associated with bikers ('Les motards, pour l'occasion endossent pour leur tenue de cuir la plus « rebelle » et viennent afficher une dégainé de voyous pour mieux faire ressortir leur humanitarisme'). Coluche is also associated with the perennial French value of 'solidarité'/'un esprit solidaire' and compassion

attributed to the 'family' of bikers (Briulet). Indeed, coverage confirms the stated values of groups like the Motards ont du Coeur, which include 'solidarité', 'avoir du coeur', 'convivialité' and 'entraide' (lesmotardsontducoeur.com). Coverage states that such motorcycle rallies and runs provide 'un moment d'émotion', and demonstrate that 'les motards' are 'sympa' (Briulet) and that charity motorcycle events are 'chaleureux' and 'convivial' ('solidarité ; Les motards de Coluche se baladent'; 'solidarité; Succès pour la balade des motards de Coluche'). Indeed, a report on a charity run in the Gers department includes reference to a minute's silence in memory of the three victims of an accident during the Course de côte de Laas-Tillac in August 2014 (Pyrda).

Worthy of Comparison

The posthumous profile of Coluche is both raised and shaped in press coverage by his association with other well-known individuals who have attained distinction in France and internationally within their respective fields. Press coverage highlights Coluche's fifth position (below Charles de Gaulle, Louis Pasteur, L'Abbé Pierre, and Marie Curie) in a 2005 list of the 100 most distinguished French figures drawn up in an opinion poll for the television programme *Le Plus Grand Français de tous les temps* (France 2, 14 March/4 April 2005) ('56% pour le oui'; 'Les dix plus grands Français') and his fourth position in a 2015 poll for *Le Figaro* ('Les cinq personnalités historiques préférées de nos internautes') ahead of Napoléon, de Gaulle and Jeanne d'Arc but behind Louis XIV ('L'Histoire d'un mec s'expose à Paris'). Coluche and the film-maker Pedro Almodóvar are linked in coverage of the Lumière film festival at the Zola cinema in Villeurbanne, which features in its programme both *Tchao Pantin* and Almodovar's *Live Flesh* (1997) ('Almodóvar et Coluche'). Coluche and fellow French film stars Louis de Funès, with whom he starred in Claude Zidi's 1976 film *L'Aile ou la Cuisse*, Gérard Depardieu and Romy Schneider, amongst others, are associated in coverage of a portrait exhibition at the Carré d'Art de Montgeron in the southeast suburbs of Paris ('Coluche, de Funès, Depardieu et Romy Schneider, entre autres...'). In 2014 coverage of a local campaign to name a local nursery school in the village of Paizay-le-Tort, Coluche's name appears on the list of contenders alongside the international political icon Nelson Mandela, as well as the local literary figures Marguerite Gurgand and André Jolly, whose name was eventually selected (Bonnet). *La Dépêche du Midi* also reports on a campaign by an inhabitant of the commune of Cajarc to erect a sign in collective recognition of the contribution of Georges Pompidou, Françoise Sagan as well as Coluche ('Cajarc ; Sagan, Pompidou et Coluche à l'honneur').

Coluche is also compared with other French figures in a variety of local contexts such as the 1930s Angers politician le comte Gautron, described as a 'farfelu type Coluche' ('Dîner avec le Coluche

angevin'), and a former deputy mayor from Asprières, Aveyron, who is set to run for the French presidency following Coluche's example ('Bernard Fouet'). Coluche's achievements are effectively compared with those of local charity workers and volunteers, for example, in a tribute to Thérèse Sottiaux (Solre-le-château) delivered by the mayor Philippe Léty and *conseiller départemental* Christian Binoit: 'Vous portez l'étendard de la générosité, vous êtes porteuse de réconfort, de messages d'espoir. Pas de doute nous avons notre Coluche' ('Thérèse Sottiaux').

Coluche's status is also legitimised and elevated via comparisons with canonical French authors and their work. In an interview with the actor and theatre director Laurent Brethome, Coluche, along with Pierre Desproges, is referred to as a modern-day version of Molière's Scapin character: 'Coluche soulevait des foules, était parfois malhonnête mais frondeur, impertinent. La société a besoin de ce genre de trublions qui ne craignent rien. Aujourd'hui, notre société n'est tissée que d'interdits et de gens insipides' (Grasso, 18 December 2014). In an interview with the actor and director Gwenhaël de Gouvello following the launch of a theatre adaptation of *Zadig*, Voltaire's *conte philosophique*, Voltaire is compared favourably with Coluche: 'Comme Coluche, il [Voltaire] faisait mouche avec une seule réplique.' (Baril). Coluche's provocative election statement from his 1981 presidential campaign, in which he describes himself as 'le seul candidat qui n'a aucune raison de vous mentir' features as part of a collection of twenty-eight 'textes qui ont tant choqué' in the news magazine *Marianne* (24 December 2015) alongside the texts of well-known provocative and transgressive philosophical, literary and political figures, as well as the *manifeste des 121* against the Algerian war and the *manifeste des 343* in favour of the legalisation of abortion. For Pierre Bénichou, Coluche is as worthy of citation as La Fontaine or Corneille ('Coluche, révolutionnaire').

In addition, Coluche is regarded, albeit somewhat simplistically, as worthy of comparison with notable non-French public figures. The Franco-Armenian actor, writer and comedian Vardan Petrosyan is referred to as a 'Coluche arménien' (Fleury); the Italian comedian, actor, political activist and former leader of the Five Star Movement Beppe Grillo as the 'Coluche italien' ('Le Coluche italien'; 'L'Incroyable essor du Coluche italien'). In a book review, clear resemblances are identified between Coluche and Mother Theresa: 'une sensibilité forte à la souffrance, une capacité de révolte, une énergie hors du commun, le don de mobiliser les autres, un charisma sans bornes.' (Pitard).

Coluche is also elevated through negative comparisons with other well-known cultural figures. A reader's letter following the proposal to erect statues of Mao and Lenin (alongside others) in

Montpellier at the *place du XXe Siècle* in front of the Centre Commercial Régional Odysseum proposes an alternative list including Coluche and other figures from sport (the athlete Alain Mimoun), popular music (the French *auteur-compositeur-interprète* Georges Brassens) and politics (the trade union activist and former president of Poland Lech Walesa) (Martin). Coluche, along with Pierre Desproges, is also viewed, comparatively speaking, in positive terms in an article critical of the controversial French comic Dieudonné (Millau).

Subject for Impersonation, Source of Inspiration

Press coverage identifies Coluche as a popular subject and source of inspiration for various professional Coluche lookalikes, impersonators, tribute artists or *sosies*. Written accounts of performances by Coluche *sosies* place emphasis on the emotions experienced by audiences, particularly feelings of nostalgia.⁶ Various similarities or resemblances between Coluche and the *sosies* are identified, from facial and bodily appearance, to clothing, behaviour and mannerisms.⁷ However, the *sosies* are also viewed as distinct from Coluche, as certain articles describe how they act out the Coluche role or character, paying tribute to him or performing their own material.⁸ Indeed, one of the *sosies* Henri Giraud highlights in an interview that his role is more than a lookalike ('La Fouillouse; Henri « Coluche » Giraud), while another Joël Dubois emphasises the various approaches that different Coluche *sosies* adopt towards the role ('Que nous dirait Coluche').

Finally, Coluche is identified as a source of inspiration for the 2008 film biopic *Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec*, providing an opportunity for the director Antoine de Caunes and star François-Xavier Demaison to publicise the film, and in so doing, present a particular view of Coluche, as well as Demaison, the performer. Playing Coluche is said to have allowed Demaison to learn more about Coluche - what he describes as the 'complexité du personnage' ('La popularité intacte de l'iconoclaste Coluche'), while a review of the film describes how Demaison embodies Coluche's 'failles, ses blessures et ses paradoxes' ('LA TOILE DU CINÉ 102 Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec'). In interview, Demaison emphasises his own sense of responsibility when playing the role of Coluche, and identifies as a factor in his decision his father, who was an admirer of Coluche's work and cried on the day of his death (Lizé). Similarly, in a television appearance Demaison describes his father's as well as his own sense of personal loss on hearing of Coluche's death (*Hommage à Coluche (Vivement Dimanche)*).

In press coverage, Demaison, rather like the Coluche *sosies*, is said to go beyond 'imitation' in order to 'endosser pleinement le personnage dans les scènes privées' ('Demaison ressuscite l'icône Coluche'; see also 'Coluche au cinéma, un exercice de funambule'). In interview, Demaison also describes his own avoidance of imitation and his 'travail d'acteur' - coached in the role for two years in terms of voice, gestures, physical appearance and weight gain, to such an extent, that he subsequently used his own one-man show to reclaim his own 'identity' ('François-Xavier Demaison est Coluche au cinéma') and awaken and/or develop certain personal qualities: his 'insolence [...] ma part la plus culottée' ('François-Xavier Demaison, à Lille le 16') and his 'côté rebelle': 'Je suis moins bien élevé maintenant, moins consensuel' (Bourgeot 2008).

As a whole, the posthumous press coverage of Coluche over the last decade or so probes the past life and generates new meaning in an ongoing process, as described in existing academic commentaries on posthumous celebrity. Media coverage perpetuates some of the types associated with Coluche's living public persona, as identified in existing academic accounts: the *râleur* with a following on the French left and conservative/reactionary right, the popular buffoon and the 'chauvinistic *mec*'. There is, however, less emphasis on the loser/*paumé* that features in the film *Tchao Pantin*. Media coverage of Coluche in death illustrates how posthumous celebrity can combine both contestation and consensus. Competing discourses focus on ownership of Coluche's work, his significance, contribution and legacy, historical accusations of vulgarity and racism, and his cinematic representation. The presence of Davis's three contrasting orders of nostalgia also contributes towards this contestation in press coverage. Consensus is generated around Coluche's association with Montrouge, biker culture, recognition of LGBTQ identities, and comparisons with other distinguished public figures, living or dead.

While the press, particularly regional and local newspaper titles, and television are both prominent vehicles for maintaining Coluche's public profile in France, this case study also indicates some possible media-specific approaches to the representation of posthumous celebrity. Press accounts focus on Coluche as a biopic subject, his associations with Montrouge and with French biker culture, his favourable comparison with other public figures, and his impersonation by and inspiration on other performers, while television serves to emphasise his achievements as an activist and to challenge accusations of vulgarity and racism. Future research could usefully account further for the significance of particular media genres and formats as well as the roles of individual journalists,

presenters, interviewers and interviewees. Comparisons might also be drawn between Coluche's posthumous media coverage and that of other popular humanitarian figures of the period in France.

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Spéciale Coluche (Les Rois du rire), France 2, 26 April 2008, 17:55.

Spécial Coluche (Personne ne bouge), Arte, 19 June 2016, 17:02.

¹ Anniversaries of the launch of *Les Restos du Coeur* and Coluche's death provide an opportunity for media outlets to celebrate and emphasise his memory, distinctive achievements and contribution via the production of various commemorative outputs. To use Richard Howell's terms with reference to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, Coluche's 'premature, dramatic and violent death' has contributed to his 'canonisation' (2011, 126). On the twentieth anniversary of Coluche's death, press coverage includes the opening of a square dedicated to him at the intersection of the 13th and 14th *arrondissements* in Paris (Doutriaux 2006a and 2006b), the *Bande Dessinée* artists who published a collective tribute album, *Coluche – la BD homage*, editions du Soleil) ('Hommage collectif à Coluche'), and the publication of *Coluche, un mec libre* (Laurent Balandras and Fabienne Waks, Editions Textuel 2006), an illustrated coffee-table book, including archive and previously

unpublished material (Médioni). The twenty-fifth anniversary sees coverage focus on a statue erected in Montrouge and on a television documentary narrated by Josephine Balasko ('Télé Balasko'). Thirtieth anniversary includes coverage of exhibitions 'rendant hommage à Coluche' at the Hôtel de Ville de Paris (October 2016-January 2017) ('Coluche, L'expo hommage'; 'Exposition « Coluche »'; 'L'Histoire d'un mec s'expose à Paris'; Perfetti 2016b) and at the Bibliothèque de Liévin ('La première expo consacrée à Coluche'; 'Pour la première fois').

² The first dispute involves Paul Lederman, Coluche's agent until his death in 1986, and Antoine de Caunes, the producer of the 2008 film 'Coluche, l'histoire d'un mec', which takes its name from one of Coluche's early sketches, 'Histoire d'un mec sur le pont de l'Alma'. Lederman, who owned the rights to the sketch and its title, demanded the removal of the sub-title 'histoire d'un mec', which risked delaying the film's release. Following a court case, the film producers won the right to use their original choice of title. See, for example, Aridj and Daniez; 'Coluche a des embrouilles'; '«Coluche», c'est l'histoire d'un procès'; 'Coluche, c'est l'histoire d'une polémique'; 'Dans « Coluche »'; 'Décision cet après-midi' and 'Le film sur Coluche'. A further case, which was eventually settled, involved the photographer Gaston Bergeret, who objected in 2013 to the use and manipulation of the famous 1985 photo portrait of Coluche used in publicity material for *Les Restos du Coeur*. See, for example, 'Coluche : la photo'; Frangeul; 'La photo de Coluche' and Vovos et al. A further dispute saw Paul Lederman sued by Coluche's sons and former wife for unpaid author's royalties relating in particular to an album recorded by Coluche, *Enregistrement public volume 2*. See, for example, 'Coluche ne fait plus rire'; 'Les fils de Coluche'; Tomasovitch 2009; and Tomasovitch 2010.

³ *Coluche toujours 20 ans; Spécial Coluche (Le Top 50 du rire); Hommage à Coluche; and Spéciale Coluche (les rois du rire)*.

⁴ Recent academic work has focused on 1920s and 1930s Hollywood stars (Bode 2014) and pop musicians (Jones and Jensen 2005), including Cath Davies' 2012 study of Michael Jackson.

⁵ Coluche's joke candidacy receives extensive coverage at the time of Antoine de Caunes' 2008 biopic focusing on the period, for example, in *Coluche (Nous nous sommes tant aimés)*; *Hommage à Coluche (Vivement Dimanche)*; *Hommage à Coluche (Les Grands du rire)*; and *Spéciale Coluche (Les Rois du rire)*. The documentary *Coluche: un clown ennemi d'Etat* features a detailed account of Coluche's presidential campaign following his exclusion from the airwaves by the radio stations Europe 1 and RMC, including the call in the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (29 October 1980) to 'tous ceux qui ne comptent pas pour les hommes politiques' to 'leur foutre au cul avec Coluche'; Coluche's appearance on the front page of another satirical magazine *Hara-Kiri* (December 1980) featuring the slogan 'Coluche: Un Président bleu-blanc-merde' and an image of him sitting on a toilet

dressed in French presidential garb with his trademark dungarees around his ankles; his popularity rating of 16% rating in a December 1980 poll of voter intentions, which caused consternation among the French political class, on both the right and left; his surveillance by the *Renseignements Généraux*; death threats as well as attempts in the press to discredit him; and his eventual withdrawal from the presidential race two months before the election . For a more recent account, see also *Coluche, 30 ans déjà*.

⁶ See, for example, 'Brussieu; Un sosie de Coluche'; 'Henri Giraud fait revivre Coluche'; 'Hommage à Coluche Ambierle'; 'Joël, sosie de Coluche'; 'Morangis - Le sosie de Coluche vous fera rire... ou pleurer' ; 'Près de chez vous'; 'Quand Henri Giraud fait revivre Coluche'; and 'Saint-Jean-sur-Reyssouze.

⁷ See, for example, 'Des airs de Coluche'; 'Henri Giraud ressuscite Coluche Charlieu'; '« Que nous dirait Coluche'; and 'Saint-Jean-sur-Reyssouze; Joël, sosie de Coluche'.

⁸ See, for example, 'Avec « Tchao l'enfoiré »'; Chamussy; 'Coluche renaît avec Henri Giraud'; 'Coluche revisité par Henri Giraud'; 'Coluche s'invite au cabaret'; Dubost; 'Henri Giraud fait revivre Coluche'; 'Henri Giraud fera revivre Coluche aux halles'; 'Henri Giraud rendra hommage à Coluche'; 'Joël Dubois: hommage à Coluche au Trousse-Chemise'; 'Mont-sous-Vaudrey; Festival de la Vouivre : Coluche revit'; 'Près de chez vous'; Rullier; 'Saint-Jean-sur-Reyssouze; Joël, sosie de Coluche'; and 'Une soirée en hommage à Coluche'.