CELEBRITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IMAGINATION

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AN INQUISITIVE PUBLIC

'This strange, languid creature spent his waking hours in the bow window of a St. James's Street club and was the receiving-station as well as the transmitter for all the gossip of the metropolis. He made, it was said, a four-figure income by the paragraphs which he contributed every week to the garbage papers which cater to an inquisitive public.' Langton Pike appears in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Adventure of the Three Gables*, a Sherlock Holmes story, first published in 1926.[1] When the great detective enquires discretely into a 'celebrated beauty' betrothed to an English nobleman, he is obliged to consult this 'human book of reference upon all matters of social scandal'. Today Pike would be a five-million-follower Twitter account incarnate writing for *People*.

Celebrity culture, as we know it, was landscaped less than twenty years ago. *Célébrité* the word may date back to fourteenth century France, and its near-synonym fame, or *fama*, has an etymology traceable to the Bronze Age (4th and early 3rd millennia BCE). But today the meaning of celebrity is unique and specific. It describes a culture, a characteristic set of attitudes and behaviour that absorbs as well as surrounds us. Emotion seems to supplant intellect; make-believe intimacies are pushed to the point where they become, after a fashion, actual. People's imaginations instigate action from fantasized realities. It is a culture in which people, perplexingly, are not the foci of consumers' attentions.

How can we reconcile this with the persuasive evidence offered in these pages by Simon Morgan and elsewhere by scholars as diverse as Leo Braudy[2] and Tom Payne?[3] These writers convey a panorama of 1,600 years, in which artists, politicians, military leaders and a miscellany of others have been immortalized in the popular mind. Clearly, there have been famous figures in history. There has also been a wanton interest in the improprieties of those figures: Conan Doyle's Edwardian gossip columnist contrives a familiar topos.

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Morgan proposes that we should 'comprehend the public sphere as a continuum, in which many seemingly disparate figures were integrated into popular culture and the public consciousness through the media and the market' (p. 109). For Morgan and indeed all those who see celebrity culture as an element of a continuous historical sequence, there are no anachronisms: the customs, events and objects of today's celebrity culture are updated versions of those found in previous cultural epochs. '[T]he late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries possessed many of the conditions for the existence of a culture of celebrity', writes Morgan, who then cites 'a highly developed commodity culture, a wide range of technologies for the large-scale reproduction of images of the famous, a burgeoning print culture, and an increasingly large pool of literate consumers able to take advantage of it all' (p. 106).

The corroborating evidence is impressive. And yet there is a paradox: some propositions, despite acceptable premises, sound reasoning and credible evidence, can lead to contradictory conclusions. The flaw in the argument that celebrity is historical lies not in its substance but in its omissions. Where, for example, do we find antecedents or historical analogues of the collective voyeurism that pulses through today's celebrity culture? Or the celebrity economy – a system of production and consumption in which people become fungible commodities and their presence an exchangeable resource? Does history bequeath to us anything comparable with the culture of covetous, aspirational consumption engendered by an entertainment industry obsessed by glamour and materialism?

Surely, people do not idolize the famous in the way described in 1838 by the positivist scholar Harriet Martineau, whom Morgan cites; they revere, venerate and, occasionally, deify others, but they also exercise proprietorial rights to them, at the same time hoping to become more like them. When Joshua Gamson characterizes contemporary fans as 'simultaneous voyeurs of and performers in commercial culture',[4] he captures this distinctive duality: we watch an activity in which we play parts, we peer as we effectuate.

It is possible to see today's media as a lineal descendant of earlier forms, dating back to the eighteenth century. But is it instructive? Surely, modern media is more encompassing, more invasive, more rapid, more compelling and less escapable than ever. One does not have to be a devotee of McLuhan to accept that it is the characteristics of a medium not the information it disseminates that influence both our thoughts and the behaviour of its users. As the media's scope, scale and character have changed, so have we. Celebrity and the culture it enkindles originate from several independent sources, none with roots deeper than the late twentieth century.

A FIRE THAT CONSUMES

The condition of being well known is immemorial: dramatists and philosophers earned reputations for their wisdom, and political and military leaders for notable achievements after the growth of city-states in the Aegean from 900 BCE. Homer, Pythagoras and Plato remain canonical figures. Alexander the Great commemorated victories over the Persian Empire by naming cities in his honour: the Egyptian port of

Alexandria was founded in 332 BCE. Alexander has been identified by Braudy as the first figure to foment his own fame.[5] Certainly, famous people appear throughout history; indeed, the way we study history is principally through the decisions and deeds of the famous. But celebrities index a particular type of historical context, one in which fame and accomplishments are decoupled.

Some scholars argue that this is not unique to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Payne finds evidence of celebrity culture in Homeric tales of the 8th century BCE, in the myth of the sixteenth-century German necromancer Dr Faustus, in the Renaissance and the Romantic period ('the age of the individual genius'). Its content is variable though its presence is universal. He hears echoes of Euripides' Electra in the cautionary tale of Britney Spears. Our legends, fables and folk tales reveal celebrity narratives. 'We make patterns out of them, and make tales of the famous fit the structures of fables', writes Payne.[6] Payne's occasionally jocose account is impressively ornamented with historical comparisons, though it is in his observations of contemporary celebrities that we find incitement. His proclamation 'The world of celebrities is not real', for example, is not as glib as it sounds.[7]

Today's celebrities, unlike the characters who are typically invoked in evidence of historical continuities, are not real people. Key to understanding 'the attraction of celebrity', writes Morgan, is 'the fan's ability to develop an imagined intimacy with the celebrity subject, a phenomenon encapsulated in [Richard] Schickel's term "intimate stranger"' (p. 99).[8] Indeed it is key: the close familiarity, perhaps even friendship, imagined by fans is exactly that – imagined. It is not intimacy at all, but abstraction. What Jorge Luis Borges wrote of time, 'It is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger; it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire', we might write of the contemporary celebrity.[9]

Celebrities are incubated in the mind: they exist outside time and space and reside only in the imagination without physical or concrete existence. Consumers engage with ideas rather than events. Stella Tillyard locates the beginnings of this: 'In the first half of the eighteenth century a process occurred by which a nascent culture of celebrity began to form side by side with an existing culture of fame.'[10] Tillyard specifies three specific sets of circumstances: a weak English monarchy with limited moral authority, the lapsing of legislation controlling the numbers of printing presses and to some extent printing itself, 'and a public interested in new ways of thinking about other people and themselves'. The new thinking involved 'speculation and gossip far freer, more direct, personal and scurrilous than we have today'.

This is an appealing but limited claim: appealing because it suggests an enthusiasm for the kind of casual, unconstrained conversation or reports about other people that has become current; limited because of the difficulties in comparing modes of thinking two centuries apart. Were consumers with a taste for gossip like today's capricious fantasists who acclaim odious and sometimes criminal behaviour just because they like the misbehaving figures? Were they able to commission the rise, fall and, sometimes, annihilation of characters with a mere shift of interest? Were their impulses stimulated by figures they thought epitomized the Good Life, envisioned as a cornucopia of consumer goods and endless novelty? Did they communicate with the

famous and the not-so-famous, without ever knowing if anyone was reading, or listening, or even if there was 'anyone' there at all? For contemporary consumers, gossip is not mere talk about other people's private lives; it is the cognitive architecture of celebrity culture.

Celebrity is produced initially by recognition. If consumers discern qualities in someone or something and take an interest in them to the point where they involve themselves in their imagined lives, they make celebrities. All celebrity is attributed: it cannot exist without public recognition. Equally, all celebrity is achieved, in the sense that even an appearance on a reality television show is an achievement, however nugatory it seems. The action of recognizing is decisive.

So, when Morgan accepts unchallenged Chris Rojek's distinction 'between *ascribed* celebrity, dependent on birth and rank, *achieved* celebrity, based on merit, and *attributed* celebrity' (p. 97), he misconceives the ontology of celebrity. Morgan also consents to Rojek's essentialist construct the 'veridical self' of celebrities, which seems to signal his faith in the conception of celebrities as living people, rather than the irreducible emergent property I am advancing here.

Category mistake that it is, the conflation of celebrities with living people is understandable: celebrities were, in earlier epochs, exactly this. What distinguishes contemporary celebrity culture is the replacement of traditional dichotomies (stars/fans; leaders/followers) by liquidity. Consumers do not occupy space on one side of a divide; there is no divide.

Perhaps this is not quite as recent as I suggest. When Morgan invokes Max Weber's concept of charisma, he reminds us that 'charismatic authority is dependent on the recognition of an individual's unique and supernatural virtues by a body of followers' (p. 100). Weber's history offered vatic insight into the way people rebel against the disenchantment and routinization of modernity. The charismatic figure 'is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities', wrote Weber, dismissing aesthetic questions about the person's authentic ('veridical'?) qualities. 'What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by … his "followers" or "disciples".'[11]

Like today's celebrities, charismatic figures were considered to be possessors of gifts or special powers. By imputing such properties, followers provided accreditation for charismatic figures. Similarly, consumers today impute properties to celebrities, but they are properties that effectively undermine charisma and reduce everything and everyone to the dimensions of commodities – things that, as Christopher Lasch put it, 'alleviate boredom and satisfy the socially stimulated desire for novelty and excitement'.[12]

Weber died in 1920 and so never witnessed the rise of the entertainment industry that promoted what Thorstein Veblen had earlier called 'pecuniary emulation' ('goods for consumption [are] honorific evidence of their owner's prepotence').[13] Hollywood stars became elected representatives of a consumer economy that accreted through the twentieth century; they helped maintain an aspirational ideal. The mechanisms of election were similar to the ones Weber examined: sprung from the followers, not individual stars.

Stars functioned as ambulant advertisements, not only for cars, clothes and the other commodities they consumed conspicuously, but for a model or way of life in which those commodities conferred satisfaction and the prestige that comes of achievement. Traditional values of thrift and self-denial were anathema to the entertainment industry. Hollywood's achievement lay in creating new demands and new discontents that could be palliated only by the consumption of commodities.

A DESECRATION OF FAME

The film *Cleopatra* was released in 1963, a year after the launch of Telstar, the first active telecommunications satellite (i.e. capable of both receiving and transmitting, rather than just reflecting, signals from earth). There was a perverse serendipity about the two events.

During the film shoot, Elizabeth Taylor, who played the illustrious queen of Egypt, 69–30 BCE, began an affair with Richard Burton, who was also in the film as Marc Antony. Both were married to other people and the filming took place in Italy, where photojournalists were, in the early 1960s, adopting an invasive style of reportage, later refined by what became known as the *paparazzi*. Armed with a zoom lens, Marcello Geppetti took photographs of Taylor and Burton *in flagrante*, which, when published, prompted an international scandal and helped change popular tastes – irremediably as it turned out. Global communications provided immediacy to scandalous moments such as this.

A new generation of *paparazzi* dispensed pictures of the famous in off-guard moments, often drunk, or in rages, or in inappropriate company; the more embarrassing, the better. Geppetti's shot catalysed identification with characters previously considered inaccessible, godlike creatures that never came within touching distance. There was instant empathy in an image of a star looking bleary-eyed after a night on the tiles, or caught kissing the wrong person.

Consumers were no longer content to gaze adoringly at the airbrushed, stylized portraits of Hollywood stars carefully dispensed by the film industry's publicity machine; their appetites for candour had been whetted – prurience, salacity and the voyeurism I mentioned earlier were almost logical developments. Over the next two decades, the pomposity of stars was periodically punctured, exposing their flaws and pointing up their humanity, and the fortified Hollywood machine was made to work to capacity. Consumers' hankering for information on what lay behind the official personae was rarely satisfied. Then, a singer-turned-movie-star essayed a different project, turning her private identity into public spectacle.

In the time that elapsed between her first album in 1983 and her fourth in 1989, Madonna had divined the motives of consumers: they sought not just to buy her recordings or see her films, but to consume her. Each fan had his or her own reasons for keeping possession of a personal, private Madonna, someone, or something, they could keep as a companion, something they could both idolize and pet. Madonna made them privy to an inspection of her life, disclosing behaviour that might, in another era, be reprehensible, if not punishable, but which, in the 1980s, took her close

to beatification. Scandals that would have been – and indeed were – ruinous for famous figures of the past were, in Madonna's hands, resources that kept her image fixed in the global media right up to the present.

Some might argue Madonna just reinvented pop music's equivalent of the wheel; others might respond that her arrival was serendipitous, owing much to the network of media that, by the mid-1980s, covered the planet. One of the questions facing nascent media was how to fill the proliferating channels of communication. The print media supplied one answer. In 1982, Gannett Publishing launched a national (and later international) daily newspaper, *USA Today*, which incorporated colourful graphics and relatively short (500-word) stories with an emphasis on entertainment news. In a decade in which an economic downturn affected most of the corporate sectors, including the media, the paper consistently turned a profit. It offered a model for even the most august broadsheets.

American cable television stations offered another answer. In 1980, ESPN and CNN began narrowcasting, i.e. transmitting to a comparatively small audience defined by special interests, in this case sport and news. Improbably, they drew viewing audiences strong enough to attract advertising revenue. Their success encouraged another channel, MTV, which went to air in 1981 with an extraordinarily meagre menu of rock videos, then in their infancy.

All three media are still thriving, though, for present purposes, MTV's growth is of particular interest: its popularity encouraged other media to capitalize on the enthusiasm for entertainment, not as a diversion but as serious activity. Madonna was pluralized by MTV and the countless other media that featured her. But more than any other medium, MTV promoted her and made her image almost inescapable.

As if to underline her arrival as a new kind of celebrity, Madonna rarely looked or behaved as she should. Her public persona morphed continually and she did not so much court scandal as ravish it, engaging the media as a mesmerist transfixes his subjects. Thus ended a distinction between the private and public that had been dissolving since the Taylor scandal.

Madonna, more than any other figure, symbolized the death-of-the-star, or at least one conception of the star. The deceased had actually emerged from the Eisenhower presidential period (1953–61). The Hollywood pantheon was invaded by musical performers, such as a renascent Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and Liberace.

Stars were adornments of a prosperous age in which the threat of the nuclear bomb remained. But they were adornments, not warrantable human beings who had similar foibles and imperfections to those of ordinary people. After Madonna, consumers' pleasures were not so much in watching admiringly from distance as in engaging: occupying themselves in others' lives, involving themselves rather than standing back and waiting to be entertained. The revelatory celebrities ushered in by Madonna were much like ordinary people, except they were better known and usually had more money. They were interlocutors as much as performers, taking part in a dialogue with consumers in a way that would have been impossible without the media technologies that permitted conversational communication.

Mobiles, or cellphones, were around in the late 1980s, but they were not the small all-purpose nodes at which communications pathways intersect and which people use as surrogates for living; they were cumbersome devices as large as a size 11 shoe. *Big Brother* was launched in Europe in 2000; the unscripted television show that incorporated viewers into its development ushered in the interactive television that has become a staple of today's programming. Facebook, the social networking site, appeared on our computer screens in 2004 and quickly viralized 500 million users, turning 'privacy inside out', as Anthony Quinn reflected in his review of David Fincher's 2010 film *The Social Network*.[14] These were three media technologies that seemed, at first, quirky adjuncts, and later became desiderata of everyday life.

Without these and other interactive media, the mutuality so central to celebrity culture would not have been possible. It is a mutuality Elizabeth Podnieks analyses as an 'experiment' in group biography in a 'tabloidized culture'. Her particular focus is the perezhilton.com website, which she describes as: 'Graphic, aural, oral, auto/biographical, collaborative, and collective, it is a postmodern celebration of and desecration of the life and times of fame today.'[15]

Perezhilton.com, a perpetual-motion gossip site co-produced by users, famous figures and the founder Perez Hilton, has become emblematic of celebrity culture: it owes little to tradition or convention and is, in many ways, arbitrary, having no obvious reason or rationality apart from attracting (it claims) over eight million visitors per day. The purpose of visiting perezhilton.com is to engage: to occupy or involve oneself in the purported life of another. 'Purported' because the appearance or imagined reality is paramount; objective actuality comes a distant second to hearsay and well-dished dirt.

Morgan comes close to acknowledging the newness of this: 'The concept of productive consumption emphasizes the active participation of the celebrity audience' (p. 99). Was consuming once a submissive, acquiescent gesture of obedience without contemplation or emotional involvement? If so, it has changed complexion in recent decades. If not, why use the adjective 'productive' to stress the orientation?

A PRISON OF OUR OWN MAKING

Celebrity is not just a modern phenomenon; it is an unparalleled contemporary occurrence. Morgan has identified the several social conditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that endure and commission today's celebrity culture. Even so, there are other conditions that are exclusive to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These include a voyeuristic pulse that propels consumers to engage in the purported lives of others and to disregard the historical purdah that once divided private and public spheres. Confessional television programmes, particularly *The Jerry Springer Show*, which first aired in 1991, assisted the disintegration of what were traditionally accepted as personal lives – and demonstrated how consumers were prepared to disclose the innermost details of their lives to an audience of millions.

What I have called the celebrity economy is both a product and a producer of changing aspirations. The shift from utilitarian purchasing to consumerism pre-dates

celebrity culture, but there is something distinctive about the way actual people have embodied exchange values. Celebrities as we imagine them function as propaganda for commodities. They obey the imperatives of an economy that needs capricious consumers ravenous for novelty, change and stimulants.

These features did not exist separately: voyeurism sustained the celebrity economy. As consumers became engrossed in, captivated by or, in other ways, absorbed in the lives of figures who had what they wanted, so they acquired the aspirational urge for commodities that fired the celebrity economy. Celebrities did not ply their labour so much as their presence, usually in the form of a moving visual image that appeared on television or computer screens, or a stationary representation on a print advertisement that reappeared in the popular imagination.

Either way, the effect was to implicate those looking at, or reading about, the celebrity in an act of consumption. Egon Franck and Stephan Nüesch avoid the trap of conceiving celebrities as people, when they declare that 'the well-knowness [*sic*] of celebrities has become a viable commodity all by itself'. It is tradable 'independent of accomplishment, heroics, or talent'.[16]

The main characters in contemporary celebrity culture are not famous; they are us – consumers, fans, everyday imagineers. We invest in figures we rarely see, apart from in print or on screen, and mythologize them, though in a way that renders them touchable. A celluloid world that was once considered faraway and unapproachable is now within reach: consumers have erased the distance between spectator and performer. So, when Payne writes 'that distant world has become ours',[17] he is a short step from recognizing how consumers have assumed a control of sorts. Interactive tv shows in which viewers decide winners or evacuees succeed in an environment where consumers exercise proprietorial rights in manifest other ways.

While it sometimes feels as if its effect on us is unpleasant, if not downright destructive, celebrity culture does not exist independently of us. And it is misleading to interpret it as exterior. When Morgan *pace* P. David Marshall depicts celebrity culture as a supporting structure, one of the 'key pillars' propping up 'consumer capitalism' (p. 100), we should mitigate the analogy. It is reminiscent of one used in the 1960s by Peter Berger, who, after adding humanizing qualifications to the then popular structural-functionalism, concluded: 'Our imprisonment in society now appears as something effected as much by ourselves as by the operation of external forces.'[18]

Similarly, celebrity culture can be visualized as a form of corporate incarceration, confining consumers in a tight social space in which they can aspire to the Good Life and find gratification only by following the imagined lives of others and striving to emulate them. If this is a prison, then it is one, as Berger puts it, where the prisoners are 'busily keeping the walls intact'.

The concept of celebrity may, as Morgan adroitly points out, have ancestry, and contemporary celebrity culture has continuities with some foregoing cultures. But there are compelling differences that suggest that it should be treated analytically as a current and, in many crucial respects, unique cultural phenomenon and not an extension of historical forms. The prurient quality of consumers' fascination, the imaginatively concocted lives to which fans dedicate themselves, the interface with globally

networked media technologies that invert privacy, the addictive pursuit of a lifestyle replete with faux glamour, conspicuous expenditure and ever-replenishing supplies of new commodities, but perhaps more significantly the perfect congruity of all these elements in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century – these are the distinct and unparalleled features of celebrity culture.

NOTES

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