

Celebrity Politicians: Popular Culture and Political Representation

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Considerable political and media attention has focused on the phenomenon of the 'celebrity politician'. As this article illustrates, there are two main variants of the phenomenon. The first is the elected politician or candidate who uses elements of 'celebrityhood' to establish their claim to represent a group or cause. The second is the celebrity—the star of popular culture—who uses their popularity to speak for popular opinion. Both examples have been seen by critics to debase liberal democratic political representation. This article challenges this critique and argues that the celebrity politician is consistent with a coherent account of political representation. This does not mean that all examples of the celebrity politician are to be seen as legitimate, but that the representative claim has to be analysed more carefully and discriminatingly than the critics typically suppose.

'Politics is just like show business' (Ronald Reagan, quoted in Postman 1987, 128).

Introduction

In 2003, readers of British newspapers were treated to these two front page stories: the first pictured the prime minister strumming an electric guitar (the home secretary was on drums) (*Daily Mail*, 14 February 2003); a week later, the second story announced that British pop stars had 'blitzed' Tony Blair over his policy towards Iraq (*Daily Mirror*, 21 February 2003). The politicians were playing at being pop stars; the musicians were playing at being politicians. In the US, they were doing it for real. Arnold Schwarzenegger, hero of Hollywood blockbusters like *Terminator*, was elected governor of California. Meanwhile, as if to confirm the message that politics and popular culture were being ever more intimately linked, elections themselves were being franchised to the makers of reality television game shows. In 2002, an Argentinian television channel launched a programme called *The People's Candidate* (*BBCi*, 13 September 2002; *Christian Science Monitor*, 21 November 2002). Modelled on the successful *Big Brother* and *Pop Idol* TV formats, the game was to involve the weekly elimination of contestants, who were to be subjected to the critical scrutiny of a judging panel and the decision of an audience vote. The prize was not, however, a mountain of cash or a recording contract. It was, instead, to be a nomination to run for Congress, the cost of the campaign being borne by the television company. Not to be outdone, a US cable company also announced that it was to organise a similar competition, *The American Candidate* (van Zoonen 2004). The winner in this case was to run for US president. The station chief expressed the hope that they might find 'a Detroit plumber who tells it like it is' (quoted in the *Drudge Report*, 8 January 2003). And finally, in April 2004 in the



UK, ITV heralded a *Pop Idol*-style show to select potential MPs (*The Guardian*, 16 April 2004; also www.itv.com/voteforme).

Such incidents can be seen to mark the rise of a phenomenon that has been dubbed 'celebrity politics', and, in so doing, to raise profound concerns about what is happening to the democratic process. As two US academics have written recently:

If we don't take back the celebrity politician system, citizens might well face a political contest between a basket-ball player versus a football player, or a comedian versus rock star, or a movie star versus a television situation comedy star. Elections are a key vehicle by which representative democracy takes place. Unless citizens receive proper information and candidates provide meaningful choices, it short-circuits the democratic procedures that all Americans value. We all deserve better choices than that [sic] currently provided in our regime based on celebrity politics (West and Orman 2002, 119).

In this article, I want to address such concerns about celebrity politics, first by briefly documenting its rise, the reaction to it and the causes for it, and then by asking about its significance and implications for ideas of political representation. When conventional politicians adopt the guise of the celebrity, when they pose as rock stars, do they appeal to images and identities that have no place in representative democratic politics, or are they establishing the very connections (between represented and representative) upon which 'representation' depends? Equally, when celebrities claim to speak for the people, when they criticise the decision to go to war, does their voice have any democratic legitimacy?

Both types of celebrity politics are typically treated with a mixture of mockery and hand-wringing. What is Blair doing pretending to be Eric Clapton; what do pop stars know about foreign policy? The assumption is that the political use of popular culture is a cynical expression of a desperate populism, one in which presentation and appearance substitute for policy and principle. What is being signified is a crisis of representation, not a realisation of it. By this account, the world of celebrity politics is one in which politicians, acutely aware of their loss of credibility and trust, resort to new forms of political communication, but in so doing further damage the very credibility and trust that they sought to salvage. One image embodies this general thought: that of the deputy prime minister, John Prescott, drenched in water at the Brit music awards by the band Chumbawamba. Here was a politician courting the celebrity limelight and being subjected to the humiliation of a pop group dousing him as a political gesture.

We are, however, not obliged to share the view that celebrity politics falls outside the bounds of proper political representation (or, for that matter, proper political study). We do not have to see the bedraggled Prescott as iconic of popular culture's relationship with politics. It is at least plausible that political ventures into the world of popular culture are a legitimate part of the complex ways in which political representation functions in modern democracies. From this perspective, what may be at stake are competing ideas about political communication and political representation. But before we begin to assess these various claims, it is useful to outline the key features of the celebrity politician.

Celebrity Politicians

The word ‘celebrity’ refers to those people who, via mass media, enjoy ‘a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch’ (Marshall 1997, ix). This general definition covers a wide variety of public figures. Darrel West and John Orman (2002, 2–6) identify five categories, covering those who acquire celebrity status by birth (the Kennedys), to those embroiled in political scandal, to those who, like Jesse Jackson, become celebrities through their charismatic public performances. They also include those ‘famed non-politicos’ who move from careers in show business into politics. While West and Orman offer a comprehensive overview of the political celebrity, my concern here is with particular examples of the phenomenon, those with a distinct and identifiable relationship to popular culture. By this I mean either those ‘famed non-politicos’—Sonny Bono or Jane Fonda—who move from careers in popular culture to politics, and those with careers in politics (‘politicos’) who make use of the artefacts, icons and expertise of popular culture. By focusing on the connection between popular culture and political representation, I hope to show how each draws on elements of the other in the relationships they establish. This article, therefore, uses only two categories of celebrity politician. The first refers to the traditional politician—the legitimately elected representative (or the one who aspires to be so)—who engages with the world of popular culture in order to enhance or advance their pre-established political functions and goals. This is the celebrity *politician* (CP1). They can be captured in the following ways:

1. An elected politician (or a nominated candidate) whose background is in entertainment, show business or sport, and who trades on this background (by virtue of the skills acquired, the popularity achieved or the images associated) in the attempt to get elected. Examples of this would include Schwarzenegger, Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood, Jesse Ventura (the professional wrestler who became governor of Minnesota) or ex-athlete and now peer, Sebastian Coe.
2. An elected politician or candidate who uses the forms and associations of the celebrity to enhance their image and communicate their message. Such techniques include:
 - i) the use of photo opportunities staged to link entertainment stars with politicians (Tony Blair posing with the England football team; Jim Davidson, Errol Brown and the Strawbs performing at Conservative party conferences; the German chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, on stage with the Scorpions rock band; the Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, singing Elvis Presley songs with Tom Cruise). A variant of this is the use of stars in party advertisements. One Labour party election broadcast featured ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell and cricket umpire Dickie Bird (and no politicians); the voice-over was provided by Kevin Whately (of *Inspector Morse* and *Auf Wiedersehen, Pet*);
 - ii) the exploitation of non-traditional platforms or formats to promote the politician: Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show*, or the MPs Charles Kennedy and Boris Johnson presenting the satirical quiz show *Have I Got News for You?*, or other politicians appearing on light enter-

- tainment chat shows (Mrs Thatcher with Michael Aspel, Tony Blair with Des O'Connor, William Hague with Jeremy Clarkson). One of the most notable recent examples was Blair's decision to appear in *The Simpsons*;
- iii) the adoption of the techniques and expertise of those who market celebrities. A *Le Monde* journalist complained that during the 2002 French presidential campaign, the left-wing party Lutte Ouvriere borrowed its 'tactics from movie stars' agents. Accreditations have to be applied for, there are waiting lists and you only get three timed questions with the star. It's as though you were interviewing Julia Roberts or Andie MacDowell' (quoted in *The Guardian*, 14 April 2002). Established feature film-makers such as Spike Jonze, Stephen Frears, Hugh Hudson and John Schlesinger have all directed election broadcasts, as has the documentary-maker, Molly Dineen.

While this first type of *celebrity* politician (CP1) has received much recent attention, the phenomenon is not new. Nearly 20 years ago, Neil Postman (1987, 135) wrote: 'Political figures may show up anywhere, at any time, doing anything, without being thought odd, presumptuous, or in any way out of place. Which is to say, they have become assimilated into general television culture as celebrities'.

The second kind of celebrity politician (CP2) describes a phenomenon that was perhaps less visible at the time Postman was writing. It refers to the entertainer who pronounces on politics and claims the right to represent peoples and causes, but who does so without seeking or acquiring elected office. Their engagement tends to take the form of public gestures or statements aimed at changing specific public policy decisions.¹ Thus, the key features of CP2s are:

1. They use their status and the medium within which they work to speak out on specific causes and for particular interests with a view to influencing political outcomes. This includes the many stars of show business who signed the published petitions against the war in Iraq and who used the other platforms to which they had access to draw attention to their political views. Those involved included Hollywood stars like Tim Robbins, Susan Sarandon, Robert Redford, Bruce Willis and Cher; or musicians like Madonna, Damon Albarn (Blur), Chris Martin (Coldplay) and Ms Dynamite, among many others. They also include people like Bono who has had audiences with President George W. Bush, President Chirac and Pope John Paul in his campaign to reduce third world debt, as well as touring Africa with the US Treasury secretary.
2. The celebrity politician (CP2) is taken seriously in respect of their political views. The measure of this might be found in:
 - i) media focus on their politics (as opposed to their art);
 - ii) political attention (e.g. a willingness by politicians to meet to discuss the particular concerns);
 - iii) audience support, measured by a willingness to contribute money to the cause (as with Live Aid) or other gestures beyond those typically required of a fan.

There are, of course, ambiguities and overlaps in these definitions of CP1 and CP2, but they serve to establish two forms of celebrity politician. Both engage with politics (conventionally understood) and both claim, albeit by different means, to

speak for others. Where they differ is in the means by which the claims to represent others are legitimated and understood.

The Critique of Celebrity Politics

Both types of celebrity politics have provoked criticism, and I want to look briefly at the terms of the critique. In particular, I want to concentrate on those criticisms that relate to the representative claim; that is, criticism which focuses on the ways that particular accounts of representation are privileged over others. The gist of the complaint is that celebrity politics undermines any claim to 'representativeness'. This is either because the elected politician (CP1) impoverishes the relationship between representative and represented by marginalising issues of political substance in favour of irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances (e.g. Franklin 1994). Or it is because the celebrity (CP2) boasts irrelevant qualities and superficial knowledge that do not justify their claim to 'represent'. As the website, 'Citizens against Celebrity "Pundits"', declares: 'We the undersigned American Citizens stand against Wealthy Hollywood Celebrities abusing their status to speak for us. We do not believe that they have a clear understanding of how we live, what we fear, and what we support' (ipetitions.com/campaigns/hollywoodceleb/).

This is not a new complaint. It builds on familiar distinctions between the trivial (entertainment) and the serious (politics), and a concern about the infection of the second by the first. This was Postman's (1987, 4) worry: 'Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education and commerce have been transformed into congenial adjuncts of show business'. Appearances and images, according to Postman (1987, 4, 129), had come to dominate politics, so that 'we may have reached a point where cosmetics have replaced ideology as the field of expertise over which a politician must have competent control'. In such a world, he continues (1987, 7), politics is diminished: 'You cannot do political philosophy on television'. It is not, therefore, arguments that decide whether voters will support one candidate rather than another, but 'style'; that is, 'how they [the politicians] looked, fixed their gaze, smiled, and deliver one-liners' (Postman 1987, 100). In such circumstances, complains Postman (1987, 137), it becomes impossible to determine 'who is better than whom, if we mean by "better" such things as more capable in negotiation, more imaginative in executive skill'.

Postman's concerns can also be detected in Joshua Meyrowitz's (1985) elegy for traditional forms of political leadership. He claimed that the increasing reliance on television as a medium of communication tends to shift the criteria by which politicians are judged and by which they operate. Television's intimacy, its use of close-ups and one-to-one conversations, focuses attention on politicians' 'human' qualities. The result is that populist empathy rather than elite leadership becomes valued. In such a world, either politicians learn the skills of the medium or those already skilled in it (the celebrity) come to dominate it. This anxiety is still present. Thomas Meyer (2002, 79), for example, has written:

If democracy is nothing but legitimation by the most successful form of communication, then the communication artist is the best democrat, with no effort whatsoever. And if the authentic play of body politics is the most

efficacious form of entertaining communication, then 'briefcase politics' with its institutionalised procedures and long-winded arguments might as well bow out now.

For such critics, 'telegenicity' has become the measure of 'representativeness' (see Zolo 1992, 162) and 'mob rule' replaces deliberation (Crick 2002, 85–90).²

The themes of these critiques of celebrity politics continue to echo through the current debate. While critics acknowledge that celebrity politics may 'reinvigorate a political process that often stagnates' (West and Orman 2002, 112), these potential benefits tend to be outweighed by the costs. In their more even-handed assessment of celebrity politics, West and Orman (2002, 112) argue that the rise of celebrity politics has seen the displacement of traditional political skills (bargaining, compromise) and their replacement by those of media management and fundraising. The qualities of the celebrity politician are ill-suited to the duties of statecraft which representatives owe their constituents. These inadequacies are compounded by ignorance. Celebrities lack the knowledge of, or expertise in, public policy: 'Serious political issues become trivialized in the attempt to elevate celebrities to philosopher-celebrities' (West and Orman 2002, 118). This finds expression in the popular discourse around the question of why we should listen to television actors on the dangers of the MMR injection (Catherine Bennett, *The Guardian*, 18 December 2002) or pop stars on the fate of the planet (Rod Liddle, *The Guardian*, 3 July 2003). Furthermore, according to West and Orman (2002, 113), the elevation of the celebrity politician leads to a distortion in the political agenda in favour of those issues which interest the rich (who are the source of the politician's campaign funds) and marginalise more pressing social problems. In summary, the argument is that celebrity politics risks 'short-circuiting' representative democracy and endangering the system of accountability (West and Orman 2002, 113).

These criticisms of celebrity politics are premised on a set of assumptions about, *inter alia*, the proper nature and character of political representation. Their particular claim is that representatives owe citizens a duty of informed political judgement. Both types of celebrity politician threaten the principles of representative democracy either because they privilege style and appearance over substance, or because they marginalise relevant expertise.

In Defence of Celebrity Politics

One line of defence is to note that what is being discussed is not as new, or as atypical, as is sometimes implied by critics, and that the criticisms are misplaced, at least in so far as things are seen as changing for the worse. With respect to CP2, there is a long and respected tradition of celebrated non-politicians engaging with politics (Milton, John Dryden and Andrew Marvell all contributed to the political debate during the English Civil War). And with respect to CP1, Leo Braudy (1997) points out that the 18th century saw the proliferation of public representations of political figures in the form of busts and portraits. The subsequent development of photography—used in particular by Abraham Lincoln—gave further impetus to the drive towards visual representations in politics. With the advent of photography,

appearance and style assumed an ever greater part of the politician's armoury. Film compounded the trend. As Braudy (1997, 556–557) explains, movie stars like Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Mary Pickford and Charlie Chaplin helped to:

'sell' the [1914–1918] war to a strongly isolationist American public uninterested in European problems ... War was a commodity that had to be advertised, and the alliance of performers and politicians is as emblematic as Lincoln's frequent trips to Mathew Brady's photographic gallery in the dark days of the Civil War.

A defence of contemporary celebrity politics in terms of its historical precedents draws upon the idea that the phenomenon is a necessary or inevitable product of social and political change. In particular, celebrity politics, and the cult of the personality that it embodies, can be seen as a product of the transformation of political communication. According to Paolo Mancini and David Swanson (1996), the breakdown of traditional social structures under the strains of modernisation have created the need for a form of political communication in which new 'symbolic realities' have to be created, containing 'symbolic templates of heroes and villains, honored values and aspirations, histories, mythologies, and self-definition' (Mancini and Swanson 1996, 9). In such a world, the focus shifts on to individual politicians and, with this, politics is 'personalised'. This trend is accentuated by a mass media whose generic conventions favour this form of politics (Mancini and Swanson 1996, 13). The new styles of political communication are logical extensions of this reality. The advertisement (and the conventions of advertising) come to define political communication. Politicians become stars, politics becomes a series of spectacles and the citizens become spectators.

The logic of this is explored in the literature on the connection between politics and marketing (Lees-Marshment 2001; see also Scammell 1999). The suggestion is not that politics just makes use of the practices and techniques of marketing, but that *politics is marketing*. As the logic of marketing takes hold, it necessarily shapes the conception of 'representation'. Representatives sell themselves to their market; successful parties are like successful entrepreneurs, and this is a fact to be welcomed, not condemned. To the extent that celebrity politics is a form of marketing, then the celebrity politician is simply making use of the techniques of marketing, either—as with CP1s—selling themselves, or as with CP2s, endorsing a product (a policy or a politician).

In short, it is possible to counter the claims of critics of celebrity politics by offering a different account of the emergence of the phenomenon, an account which sees it both as having historical precedents, and, in so far as it is new, as being part of a process of modernisation and the enhancement of political communication. But offering an alternative account of the emergence of CP1 and CP2 does not go to the heart of the various criticisms. The critics' main objection, as we have noted, is based on two elements—the first has to do with the excess attention given to image and appearance, and the second has to do with the irrelevance of the expertise which celebrity politicians possess. The fact that there are precedents or contributing social trends for CP1 and CP2 does not invalidate these criticisms. That we can explain the rise of the celebrity politician in terms of media trends does not provide a validation for them. Those media trends may be the product of the com-

mercial and political interests of the press, which leads to the 'tabloidisation' of the news agenda (Franklin 1998). The celebrity politician is then simply the result of a celebrity-obsessed media, acting for reasons other than for some notional public good. In these circumstances, the question remains as to whether the use of images or the involvement of stars undermines representative government. To address the core criticisms, it is important to ask whether forms of celebrity politics can actually enhance, in principle, representative government.

To defend celebrity politics on these lines requires paying attention to the character of the link being established between the represented and the representative. Can the involvement of popular culture strengthen the representative relationship? Stephen Coleman (2002, 254), for example, argues that forms of popular culture can resonate with people in ways that traditional forms of political communication cannot. The popularity of *Big Brother*, he suggests, owes much to the fact that the contestants were seen as 'representative', as 'people like us. They spoke and behaved in ways that appealed to sections of the public who traditionally feel intimidated by the language and discourse of politics'. It may be, as Coleman (2003, 31) acknowledges, that the *Big Brother* housemates are no more typical of the population than are MPs, but what is important to the perception of them as 'representative' is 'the ordinariness of their preoccupations: what to eat; when to sleep; wanting to be liked'. These constitute the realities of daily life which condition the legitimisation of representation. The *Big Brother* contestants are scrutinised by their audience in respect of their authenticity, itself a measure of integrity and trustworthiness, and in so doing they establish criteria of representativeness that could be applied to politics (Coleman 2003, 32).

In a similar vein, John Keane (2002, 13) has argued that the success of maverick political figures (like Ross Perot, Ralph Nader, Pauline Hanson, Martin Bell and Pim Fortuyn) owes something to the fact that they can 'claim to champion the interests of the unrepresented, all those who don't identify with politicians'. The 'popularity' of these politicians is a measure of their ability to establish claims to represent the people. It is a claim that derives from a world which, says Keane (2002, 13–15), is marked by 'communicative abundance', and in which popular identities derive from the role models provided by the celebrities who inhabit this world. In so far as people's sense of self and others is mediated in this way, it becomes plausible to claim that CP2s 'represent' the people, and for CP1s to base their claim to 'representativeness' on the icons and techniques of the celebrity.

However, this argument is unlikely to impress the critics of celebrity politics for one important reason: the critics' notion of representation is different to that adopted by the defenders of celebrity politics. Where the former are concerned with the capacities and skills of the representative, the latter are concerned with their resemblance to the represented. This is, of course, a familiar divide, captured in A. H. Birch's (1964, 16) tripartite distinction between representation by activity, selection or personal characteristics, or in Hanna Pitkin's (1967) distinction between 'standing for' and 'acting for'. The critics of celebrity politics appeal to the notion of representation captured in the idea of activity and acting for, while the defenders favour an account couched in terms of resemblance or mirroring. Coleman too (2003, 30) acknowledges a similar divide between competing notions

of representation, couching it in terms of the contrast between representation as a product of procedures ('selection', in Birch's terms) and reflection or resemblance. If the distinction between the competing modes of representation was an essentially contested one, then we would be compelled to conclude that the debate over celebrity politics may as well end here. The debate would be based on fundamentally different values which could neither be reconciled nor eliminated. But for Pitkin at least, the distinction is not an essentially contested one. The notion of representation as 'standing for', she writes, does 'not exhaust the concept of representation' (Pitkin 1967, 111). However, to open up the concept of representation to include a variety of facets and forms does not in itself legitimate the claims entailed by either CP1 or CP2. For that it is necessary to challenge the formal distinctions which have tended to dominate discussion of representation.

One key challenge has been launched by those who want to stress the symbolic and aesthetic dimensions of representation. Jean-Pascal Daloz (2003), for example, has argued that representation in any of its forms exists as a symbolic relationship that negotiates principles of identification and of distinction. Michael Saward (2003a) pursues a similar line in his argument that Pitkin's account excludes the way in which 'representation' is symbolically evoked. For such writers, representation necessarily entails 'appearance' and claims to 'represent' can emerge in a variety of contexts and can be validated in a variety of ways. The rest of this article is given over to exploring the basis of this move, and its implications for an understanding and evaluation of celebrity politics. How does popular culture help to symbolise representation? In answering this question, I shall argue that representation has to be understood as both a political process and a cultural performance, and that the issue of whether celebrity politics, in either form, constitutes a legitimate basis for representation depends on the characteristics of both the process and the performance.

The Rationality of Appearance

One of the assumptions of the critics of celebrity politics is that judging by appearance is an inappropriate basis for the evaluation of representatives. Rather, they claim that representatives should be judged in terms of the quality of their policy proposals, the ideological coherence of their manifesto, the sophistication of their political skills or the legitimacy of their selection procedures. But while such issues are indeed important to the representative–represented relationship, they do not exhaust its character and content. Working within rational choice theory, Geoffrey Brennan and Alan Hamlin (2000) argue that 'appearance' has a legitimate place within the relationship. In their defence of the argument that representative democracy is not to be seen as a 'second best' to direct democracy, they argue that voting has to be seen as an 'expressive act', indeed as a 'speech act', and not as an instrumental act (in the Downsian sense) directed to specific policy outcomes. As an expressive act, the vote is understood as allowing the voter to identify with politicians and to seek out what they (the voters) find 'politically attractive'. Although 'attractiveness' can be measured along many axes, included amongst them is 'appearance'. Brennan and Hamlin write (2000, 178): 'it would be perfectly rational (in the strict sense) to vote on the basis of a candidate's appearance

or speaking voice if those are the characteristics the voter identifies with'. The more typical basis for assessment, according to Brennan and Hamlin, is 'character and competencies'. But whatever the focus of the assessment, the suggestion is that rational actors faced with the decision of whom to select as their representative will do so on the basis of factors other than policy coherence, political skilfulness or ideological consistency. 'Appearance' may stand as a proxy for such things, but it is the appearance of competence, not the fact of it that is being discerned. In this context, the repertoire of gestures associated with celebrity politics assumes a greater importance for CP1s who use them to demonstrate their political character and CP2s who use them to establish their authenticity or integrity.

One implication of this argument that appearance matters is that political analysis must develop methods of 'reading' appearance, as well as taking cognisance of the traditional aspects of political communication and action. In the words of John Corner and Dick Pels (2003, 16), it means 'straddling the "higher" dimension of political rationality and political speech and the "baser" one that admits affect, body language, "looks", dress code, and other stage props of political performance'.³ An example of this straddling can be found in an edited collection of studies of post-war political communication in Italy (Cheles and Sponza 2001). It describes the aesthetics of political advertisements, the sound of campaign anthems, the dress sense of political leaders; it foregrounds the ritualistic dimension of political representation. As well as making a case for the place of rituals and symbols in political representation, the book furnishes evidence for a larger claim: that representation does not just mean the *use* of symbols and rituals, but that it *is constituted by them*. As one contributor contends: 'Political parties can exist only through symbolic representation' (Kertzer 2001, 100). Without necessarily accepting this radical constructivism, the suggestion remains that the performative, aesthetic dimension of the representative relationship cannot be eliminated. This certainly is the thesis developed by F. R. Ankersmit, to whose arguments we now turn, as a way of locating celebrity politics within 'normal' politics.

The Aesthetics of Representation and Political Style

Ankersmit has developed an aesthetic account of political representation. His argument begins from the observation, first, that political representation predates democracy and, second, that it borrows its meaning from aesthetics, from the way works of art stand in relation to some notion of reality. Ankersmit (2002) begins with the two familiar, competing accounts of representation. The first is representation as resemblance; the second is representation as substitution. Ankersmit dismisses the 'resemblance' version on the grounds that it is incoherent to claim that marks on a canvas or words on a page 'resemble' the things to which they refer. They are 'substitutes'; they literally re-present objects or ideas. Furthermore, the suggestion that reality can only exist in representational form is used to underpin Ankersmit's claim that politics too can only exist in representational form. This argument is not simply the familiar one about the practical limits to direct democracy, but rather that 'without political representation we are without a conception of what reality—the represented—is like; without it, political reality has neither

face nor contours. Without representation there is no represented' (Ankersmit 2002, 115).

One of the implications of this argument, according to Ankersmit (2002, 116–117, original emphasis), is that 'the politician must possess the essentially *aesthetic* talent of being able to represent political reality in new and original ways'. And this in turn leads to a discussion of the character and importance of 'political style' (Ankersmit 2002, 132ff.). Style is the way in which politicians and parties communicate their relationship to the electorate and to their future public goals. As Dick Pels (2003, 50) puts it: 'Political style ... enables citizens to regain their grip on a complex political reality by restoring mundane political experience to the centre of democratic practice'. Ankersmit suggests that the question of whether a state or any other agency represents its people is a matter of 'taste'. Representation, whatever the principles or ethical values informing it, does not reflect the world so much as organise knowledge about it. Just as art creates a version of reality, making present what is otherwise absent, Ankersmit contends that political power comes into existence via the act of representation. It is a product of style and creativity. He writes (1996, 54):

When asking him or herself how best to represent the represented, the representative should ask what political style would best suit the electorate. And this question really requires an essentially creative answer on the part of the representative, in the sense that there exists no style in the electorate that is quietly waiting to be copied.

Although such arguments have typically been applied to fascism, especially that of Mussolini's Italy (see Falasca-Zamponi 1997), they have also been applied to liberal democracies (see Corner and Pels 2003; Cheles and Sponza 2001; Meyer 2002).

In summary, what emerges from the arguments of Brennan and Hamlin, Ankersmit and others is the thought that in analysing forms of political representation in modern democracies, we need to be aware of the ways in which this relationship is constituted and experienced aesthetically. From this perspective, the phenomenon of the celebrity politician takes on, I would suggest, a different aspect. It is not to be dismissed as a betrayal of the proper principles of democratic representation, but as an extension of them. Celebrity politics is a code for the performance of representations through the gestures and media available to those who wish to claim 'representativeness'. It does not follow from this that all forms of celebrity politics are to be welcomed (any more than all forms of art or political ideology are to be welcomed).⁴ What it does suggest is that we need to approach differently the analysis and understanding of political representation. The last part of this article explores the implication of this for the two types of celebrity politician we have identified.

Politics as Performance: The Case of CPI

The process as it applies to CPIs is captured in John Corner's (2000) account of the construction of a political persona, a process which he contends has been over-

looked by political scientists. Corner argues that the contemporary representative politician has to be understood in terms of the persona that they construct or that is constructed for them. A politician engages in a performance that is intended to establish him- or herself as 'a *person of qualities*' within the public space of '*demonstrable* representativeness' (Corner 2000, 396, original emphasis). Rather than siding with those who bemoan the 'personalisation' of politics, Corner argues (2000, 401) that the individual political figure serves to 'condense "the political"' for those they represent. Through a mediated public performance, politicians try to demonstrate certain political qualities and to connect them to political values. For Corner, the analysis of a political persona depends on an understanding of both the intentions of the politician and of the interaction between him or her and the available media systems. The analysis is of a performance that involves demeanour and posture, voice and appearance (Corner 2000, 391).

Seeing political representation in these terms takes it much closer to the realm of show business and the world of the celebrity. The logic of this is adopted by P. David Marshall (1997, 203), who writes that 'in politics, a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people, and the state. In the realm of entertainment, a celebrity must somehow embody the sentiments of an audience'. Marshall argues that the existence of politicians *as celebrities* has to be understood as part of a process of filling out political rationality to include the affective relationships as well as the instrumental ones. If they are to be the objects of affection, to be 'attractive', then this intent informs the way in which they seek to communicate. It suggests that spindoctors are the equivalent of PR people in film and record companies, managing the image and appearance of their clients. It is about deciding what interviews, with whom, when; it is about rationing the supply of images and information to coincide with the release of the latest record/policy initiative. Explaining the political success of Governor Jesse Ventura, his media adviser said: 'Jesse's worked in movies, he's been a pro-wrestler, he understands pop culture. He gets it. He knows what's going to play in public, and he's not afraid to take chances' (quoted in West and Orman 2002, 11).

Political representation is an art that draws on the skills and resources which define mass-mediated popular culture. Thomas Meyer (2002, 32) writes of the 'logic of mass media', which casts—and the theatrical metaphor is intended—politicians as:

embodying qualities, forces, tendencies, virtues, programs or powers that carry powerful resonance in a country's political culture and mythology. Thus Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroeder were cast as men of will, virtue, innovativeness and the 'can-do' spirit, regardless of the actual content of the programs they stood for.

These characters occupy 'dramas' and 'narratives' that draw from myth and popular heroes, sliding between life and art. Meyer (2002, 33) talks of the 'artistry of entertainment in politics', referring to the way in which politicians use the formats of entertainment 'to prove that they have the common touch and know how to relax'. Meyer sees politics as being 'revisualised' (made visible) by the technologies of mass communication, drawing on the rhetoric and devices of popular culture.

What Corner, Marshall and Meyer suggest is that we need to understand the representative relationship as one that is not just analogous with other forms of popular performance, but is derived from it. Adoption of the trappings of popular celebrity is not a trivial gesture towards fashion or a minor detail of political communication, but instead lies at the heart of the notion of political representation itself. In the case of CPI, therefore, the representative claim has to be analysed as a performance which reveals and establishes certain qualities and values. In this process, two things can happen: first, the CPI may succeed or fail in conveying those values and qualities in their use of the various devices and gestures to which they resort; and second, their performance may be judged as successful or a failure (they may be seen as 'cool' or 'stupid'). Either way, the judgement of their claim to represent the people legitimately is not directly linked to whether or not they engage in celebrity politics. Put differently, all politicians are celebrity politicians, only some are more convincing, more 'authentic' performers than others.

Performers as Representatives: The Case of CP2

In considering the case of CP2s, we return to the question of whether or in what sense, if any, unelected persons can claim to 'represent' popular views? I do not intend to contribute to this theoretical question here (see Saward 2003b for a thorough analysis of the claims involved), and instead I want to suggest that it is at least conceivable that unelected persons may legitimately represent politically the views and values of others. What is important in this context is how the claim to representative legitimacy is made. What *conditions* underlie the making of the claim by the unelected that they 'represent' a view or a constituency? What logic operated, for example, in the thoughts of those who sought the support of stars who opposed the war in Iraq (Damon Albarn, Julian Barnes, William Boyd, Tracey Emin, Harry Enfield, David Gilmour, Nick Hornby, Jeremy Irons, Elton John, Emma Thompson ...)? The assumption was that these stars mattered as commentators on the war, as representatives of popular opinion.

One suggestion is that these stars are 'in touch' with popular sentiment, a claim that itself derives from assumptions about how the celebrity and their admirers are related. It is a claim about fandom. John Thompson (1995, 220–225) has argued that being a 'fan' is an important, even defining, characteristic of modernity. It entails formation of relations of 'intimacy with distant others' (Thompson 1995, 220), and this can be seen to be the basis of a form of (political) representation. As a fan of Bruce Springsteen once said: 'I think it's good that, say, someone in his position, or anyone in that position, when they write a line on a piece of paper, millions of people get to hear it, as opposed to when I write something only I get to hear it' (quoted in Cavicchi 1998, 118). This sense of being represented in the experience of fandom is captured by Nick Hornby in his account of his life as a fan of Arsenal football club. Writing of a championship victory, he says: 'The joy we feel on occasions like this is not a celebration of others' good fortune, but our own ... The players are merely our representatives, chosen by the manager rather than elected by us, but our representatives nonetheless, and sometimes if you look hard you can see the little poles that join them together, and the handles at the side that enable us to move them' (Hornby 2000, 179). This representational relation-

ship is established by the 'affective' capacity of the cultural performance. Indeed, Lawrence Grossberg (1992, 86) suggests that this very capacity is intrinsically political in that it can generate a sense of 'empowerment' that makes possible 'the optimism, invigoration and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world'. Liesbet van Zoonen (2004, 49) also draws this affective connection between fandom and politics when she argues that 'fan communities and political constituencies bear crucial similarities'.⁵ But 'fandom' or cultural consumption do not of themselves establish a claim to represent politically.

It might be observed that certain performers—Britney Spears, for example—do not establish the same kind of (political) relationship with their fans as does Bono or Springsteen. Why? One of the other factors involved is the genre in which they work. It is apparent that certain genres establish conventions and opportunities for political engagement (e.g. folk, rock, hip-hop, country music) in ways that others do not (teenpop, easy listening). And even genre-based accounts of the representative claim have to take account of the ways in which these genres are themselves constituted by media representations and business strategies as 'political'. Folk music is not 'intrinsically' political; its politics are the product of the ways in which certain political movements (e.g. the Popular Front or CND) 'captured' the music for their purposes (Cantwell 1996; Denning 1997). Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison (1997) argue that, during the 1960s, the capacity of folk and rock stars to assume a political role was a product of the context created by the social movements active at the time, which required of them the role of 'truth bearers'. What this suggests is that the claim by celebrities to speak for others is conditional upon a number of factors, which includes generic conventions but extends to the larger social and political context in which they operate.

Furthermore, the capacity to 'represent' is not simply a product of the artist and their genre's conventions. Bob Geldof's ability to represent the conscience of those concerned about starvation in Africa was dependent on the BBC's willingness to make airtime available for the broadcasting of the Live Aid concerts in London and Philadelphia. Without the mediated public sphere provided by the broadcaster, Geldof's claims would have been silenced. In a similar way, the oppressive actions of states can, unintentionally, create platforms and opportunities for performers to become political representatives. Recent studies of the role of musicians in communist states have shown how performers become representatives almost by default. When other forms of constitutional representation are denied, musicians assumed responsibility for organising and representing political opposition to the regime (see Cushman 1995; Ramet 1994; Szemere 2001; Sheeran 2001; Wicke 1992). What is contended is that, under conditions where the state monopolises the conventional forms of political communication and seeks to regulate all forms of artistic expression, it becomes possible for musicians and other performers to assume a leadership role, legitimated by their success as artists. The state, in its regulatory role, politicises artistic expression, and the aesthetics of the art in turn make possible an alternative form of political expression. Peter Wicke (1992), for instance, argues that East German rock musicians were instrumental in uniting the opposition to the Honnaker regime and in bringing about the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Anna Szemere (2001) highlights the role of popular musicians in the management of the transition from communism within Hungary. Robert Cushman

(1995) and Peter Sheeran (2001) document the ways in which the rock underground articulated political opposition to the Soviet authorities. Sheeran (2001, 8) claims that 'it was the dissident content of coded Soviet lyrics that caused most damage to the longevity of the Soviet system'. Even allowing for the hyperbolic character of such remarks, these studies make a powerful case for crediting musicians with more than a decorative role in the course of political events. In so far as these musicians articulated political sentiments and organised political action, they acted to represent those associated with political opposition.

The capacity to claim to speak politically as a celebrity is determined by a number of conditions and structures, as well as by the affective bond which is created by the relationship between the celebrity and their admirers. In certain contexts and under particular conditions, performers can lay claim to represent those who admire them. They give political voice to those who follow them, both by virtue of the political conditions and by means of their art. And as Ankersmit claims for traditional forms of representation, this is not a matter of mimetics but of aesthetics, of creatively constituting a political community and representing it.

Conclusion

There is a risk that the preceding arguments, which have tried to locate celebrity politics within the conventions of representative democracy, might be read as an argument for uncritical populism. That is not the intention. To see certain forms of behaviour and styles as examples of the logic of celebrity politics is not to treat the political views as equally valid or the actors as genuine representatives, any more than it is right to see the prime minister strumming a Fender Stratocaster as an effective way of establishing a representative link with young people or to see Bono as an authoritative political commentator. To draw attention to the role of 'style' and 'aesthetics' and 'attractiveness' in political representation is not to see all styles as plausible or appealing.⁶ The analysis of political representation does not commit the analyst to celebrating all forms of celebrity politics (any more than we are committed to celebrating all forms of culture—Jeffrey Archer and Jane Austen). The point is that the process of discrimination must acknowledge the aesthetic character of the representative relationship, in which notions of 'authenticity' or 'credibility', style and attractiveness, are legitimate terms.

This article has tried to suggest that the celebrity politician is not in fact an exaggerated form or exceptional form of all political representation, but rather characteristic of the nature of political representation generally. In so doing, I have drawn on literature emerging both from within political science and within the study and experience of popular culture. This cross-disciplinarity is becoming more commonplace. Just as discussion of citizenship has focused on its relationship to culture (e.g. Stevenson 2001), so we need to see political representation as a cultural act which seeks to realise a form of political attractiveness through the gestures and images of popular culture. This is not just a matter of seeing representation as a cultural performance, of noting the use of the icons and images of popular culture in politics, nor just of appreciating the use of politics by celebrities, but of seeing both as symptomatic of the link between politics and popular aesthetics. For some,

this may signal the demise of representative politics, but it might also indicate an added dimension to our appreciation of political representation, one which needs to be sensitive to the aesthetics and politics of its performative character.

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Notes

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1. For the purposes of the discussion here, this does not include the many examples of political expression to be found throughout popular culture. Though these are clearly political acts, the performer is in these cases acting as an artist first and as political activist second; they are addressing an audience of fans rather than citizens.
2. Crick's particular criticism is addressed to the 'democracy' of *Big Brother* which, he argues, gives expression to a hatred of society. His arguments echo those of Joseph Schumpeter's (1976 [1942]) on collective irrationality.
3. Jon Simons (2000) evokes a similar mode of analysis with his concept of 'imagology'.
4. Take these two examples of celebrities taking on the guise of politicians. In the UK general election of 2001, the *Daily Star's* front page headline (24 May 2001) read: 'JORDAN: I'VE GOT THEM BY THE BALLOTS'. The opening paragraph continued: 'Britain's sexiest political candidate whacked the three main political parties in the ballot boxes yesterday. Fun loving Jordan, the 34F independent candidate ...'. Two weeks earlier the same paper had the headline: 'BRITNEY BACKS LABOUR' (*Daily Star*, 16 May 2001). The claim that Jordan or Britney Spears 'represents' the people is being constructed in very obvious and crude ways by the *Daily Star*. There is no requirement to accept at face value the representative claim being made. The right to represent is not a simple product of making the claim; nor is it a matter of being 'popular'. And what is true for CP2s is also true for CP1s. The ways in which elected politicians or aspiring candidates represent themselves are part of a process, and the results are open to evaluation in similar ways.
5. In a similar vein, Murray Forman (2000) talks about the way popular music 'represents' locality to its fans and followers through the narratives and histories it constructs.
6. John Kane (2001, 10) uses the idea of 'moral capital' to explain why some politicians succeed in delivering a useful service, and as he points out: 'It is possible to be popular while lacking moral capital, or to possess moral capital while not being popular'.

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