



Celebrity and Celetoids

Although God-like qualities are often attributed to celebrities, the modern meaning of the term *celebrity* actually derives from the fall of the gods, and the rise of democratic governments and secular societies. This is no accident. The increasing importance of the public face in everyday life is a consequence of the rise of public society, a society that cultivates personal style as the antidote to formal democratic equality. The Latin root of the term is *celebrem*, which has connotations with both ‘fame’ and ‘being thronged’. There is also a connection in Latin with the term *celere*, from which the English word *celerity* derives, meaning ‘swift’. The Latin roots indicate a relationship in which a person is marked out as possessing singularity, and a social structure in which the character of fame is fleeting. The French word *célèbre*, meaning ‘well known in public’, carries similar connotations. In addition, it suggests representations of fame that flourish beyond the boundaries of religion and Court society. In a word, it ties celebrity to a *public*, and acknowledges the fickle, temporary nature of the market in human sentiments. These are prominent themes in contemporary social theory. Indeed, modernity is often understood as a condition

defined by the spread of episodic, anonymous relations in culture, and the increasing speed of change in social and economic life.

In this book I treat celebrity as the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere. Several caveats must be added to this definition. First, glamour and notoriety are usually thought of in polarized terms. The Brazilian model Gisele Bundchen is glamorous; Timothy McVeigh, the Oklahoma City bomber, is notorious. Glamour is associated with favourable public recognition. Notoriety is unfavourable public recognition. Notoriety is a sub-branch of celebrity culture, and, arguably, an increasingly important one. Leaving moral considerations aside, what connects Bundchen to McVeigh is cultural impact. We might reduce this to an admittedly rather crude equation: $\text{celebrity} = \text{impact on public consciousness}$. The equation will certainly have to be modified in what follows, but as a starting point it will help to focus the discussion on what, today, is justly described as the public addiction to celebrity. Why do so many of us measure our worth against figures we have never met? Why is the desire for fame so widespread among ordinary people? The answers have something to do with the way that public life is constructed. The media determine this idiom, although the content remains a matter of political and ideological exchange. The scheduling of emotions, presentation of self in interpersonal relations and techniques of public impression management, which employ media celebrities to humanize and dramatize them, permeate ordinary social relationships.

Second, the question of who is attributing celebrity status is moot. Celebrities are cultural fabrications. Their impact on the public may appear to be intimate and spontaneous. In fact, celebrities are carefully mediated through what might be termed chains of attraction. No celebrity now acquires public recognition without the assistance of cultural intermediaries who operate to stage-manage celebrity presence in the eyes of the public. 'Cultural intermediaries' is the collective term for agents, publicists, marketing personnel, promoters, photographers, fitness trainers, ward-

robe staff, cosmetics experts and personal assistants. Their task is to concoct the public presentation of celebrity personalities that will result in an enduring appeal for the audience of fans. This holds good for the public presentation of notorious celebrities. The fiction of James Ellroy and Jake Arnott spins a mantle of glamour around notorious historical celebrity figures like Lee Harvey Oswald, Sam Giancana and Reggie and Ronnie Kray. In the 1990s, movie directors like Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie, now Madonna's husband, glamorized the Underworld in films like *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Jackie Brown*, *Lock, Stock & Two Smoking Barrels* and *Snatch*.

Third, celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self. The social psychologist George Herbert Mead argued that the split between the *I* (the 'veridical' self) and the *Me* (the self as seen by others) is the human condition, at least since ancient times, in Western society.¹ The public presentation of self is always a staged activity, in which the human actor presents a 'front' or 'face' to others while keeping a significant portion of the self in reserve. For the celebrity, the split between the *I* and the *Me* is often disturbing. So much so, that celebrities frequently complain of identity confusion and the colonization of the veridical self by the public face. Cary Grant dealt with this ironically by remarking that he, like his audience, would love to be like Cary Grant, by which he meant that even he acknowledged the split between his public face and his veridical self. Other celebrities suffer a clinical or sub-clinical loss of identity. For example, Peter Sellers complained that he 'disappeared' once a film role ended. This suggests that his sense of veridical self was virtually extinguished. Contrarily, the veridical self may make increasingly desperate attempts to overcome the tyranny of the public face. This may result in a pathological slippage between the *I* and the *Me*, as the public face resorts to more dramatic attempts in order to alert the public to the horror, shame and encroaching helplessness of the veridical self. Keith Moon, The Who's former drummer, and the late film star Oliver Reed are examples of chronic

identity slippage. This may be understood as a pathological condition, since the public face of both celebrities became increasingly dependent on alcohol and, in Moon's case, drugs too.

Of course, the desire to transcend the veridical self is often the chief motive behind the struggle to achieve celebrity status. Johnny Depp, during the filming of *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), is reported to have attacked photographers at a London restaurant for their intrusion, complaining that 'I don't want to be what you want me to be tonight.' A notable paradox of fame is that this desire frequently culminates in either a sense of engulfment by a public face that is regarded as alien to the veridical self or, worse, a sense of personal extinction in the 'face' of others who treat the veridical self as 'inauthentic'.

Fourth, a distinction should be made between celebrity, notoriety and renown. *Renown*, in this book, refers to the informal attribution of distinction on an individual within a given social network. Thus, in every social group certain individuals stand out by virtue of their wit, beauty, courage, prowess, achievements or grace. Renown, you might say, depends on reciprocal personal or direct para-social contact. These individuals have a sort of localized fame within the particular social assemblage of which they are a part. In contrast, the fame of the celebrity is ubiquitous. One peculiar tension in celebrity culture is that the arousal of strong emotion is attained despite the absence of direct, personal reciprocity. Whereas renown follows from personal contact with the individual who is differentiated as unusual or unique, celebrity and notoriety assume a relationship in which the individual who is differentiated by honorific status is distanced from the spectator by stage, screen or some equivalent medium of communication. Social distance is the precondition of both celebrity and notoriety. This frequently leads to friction in the management of inter-personal relations between celebrities, spouses, children and kin. Those who command public acclaim and desire often suffer severe distress when approval is not demonstrated in private life. Elizabeth Taylor, Frank Sinatra, Jayne

Mansfield, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Burton and Judy Garland all married and divorced several times, and appear to have experienced difficulties when seeking to establish a stable relationship.

Celebrity, the Media and Celebrification

I focus on attribution and distance rather than the innate qualities or characteristics of celebrity because I believe that mass-media representation is the key principle in the formation of celebrity culture. To us, celebrities often seem magical or superhuman. However, that is because their presence in the public eye is comprehensively staged. One of the best examples of this is also one of the first publicity stunts of the film age. In March 1910, the Biograph Film Company announced the tragic and untimely death of one of its brightest stars, Florence Lawrence. In fact, Lawrence was alive and well, and her subsequent appearance in St Louis won the film company unprecedented publicity.

The emergence of celebrity as a public preoccupation is the result of three major interrelated historical processes. First, the democratization of society; second, the decline in organized religion; third, the commodification of everyday life. Each of these three themes will be elaborated in what follows. It is sufficient to say at this point that the decline of Court society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involved the transference of cultural capital to self-made men and women. As modern society developed, celebrities have filled the absence created by the decay in the popular belief in the divine right of kings, and the death of God. The American Revolution sought to overthrow not merely the institutions of colonialism but the ideology of monarchical power too. It replaced them with an alternative ideology, in some ways no less flawed and fantastic: the ideology of the common man. This ideology legitimated the political system and sustained business and industry, thus contributing immensely to the

commodification of celebrity. Celebrities replaced the monarchy as the new symbols of recognition and belonging, and as the belief in God waned, celebrities became immortal. This is why, for example, Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, Gandhi and Winston Churchill retain an immense aura in contemporary culture. It is also why John Wayne, dead for over 20 years, is still regularly voted to be one of the most popular movie stars in America; and why Rudolph Valentino, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, John F. Kennedy, James Dean, John Lennon, Jim Morrison, Tupac Shakur and Kurt Cobain remain idols of cult worship. Politically and culturally, the ideology of the common man elevated the public sphere as the arena *par excellence*, in which the dramatic personality and achieved style inscribed distinction and grabbed popular attention. To this extent, celebrity culture provides an important integrating function in secular society.

At the same time, the desire mobilized by celebrity culture is abstract. The logic of capitalist accumulation requires consumers to constantly exchange their wants. The restlessness and friction in industrial culture partly derives from the capitalist requirement to initiate perpetual commodity and brand innovation. In such circumstances desire is *alienable*, transferable, since wants must be perpetually switched in response to market developments. The market inevitably turned the public face of the celebrity into a commodity. We will not understand the peculiar hold that celebrities exert over us today unless we recognize that celebrity culture is irrevocably bound up with commodity culture. In chapter Five I will take up the implications of this.

But consumers are not merely part of a market of commodities, they are also part of a market of sentiments. Capitalist organization requires individuals to be both desiring objects and objects of desire. For economic growth depends on the consumption of commodities, and cultural integration depends on the renewal of the bonds of social attraction. Celebrities humanize the process of commodity consumption. Celebrity culture has emerged as a central mechanism in structuring the market of human senti-

ments. Celebrities are commodities in the sense that consumers desire to possess them. Interestingly, this point extends to notorious celebrity figures. The serial killers Ian Brady, Myra Hindley, Rosemary West, Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, Harold Shipman and Timothy McVeigh were all deluged with fan mail while in prison. McVeigh, who was executed on 11 June 2001, had received four proposals of marriage. Far from being reviled and outcast, notorious celebrities are cherished as necessary folk devils by significant layers of the public.

It is easy to see why mainstream celebrities feed the everyday world with honorific standards of attraction that encourage people to emulate them, which helps to cement and unify society. *Prima facie*, it is less easy to understand the fan base for notorious celebrities. Except, perhaps, when one places the notorious celebrity in the context of democracy, with its equalizing functions, its timorous disdain for extremity and its grey affirmation of equal rights and responsibilities. In such a context, the figure of notoriety possesses colour, instant cachet, and may even, in some circles, be invested with heroism for daring to release the emotions of blocked aggression and sexuality that civilized society seeks to repress.

If celebrity society possesses strong tendencies to make us covet celebrities, and to construct ourselves into objects that immediately arouse sentiments of desire and approval in others, it also creates many more losers than winners. The celebrity race is now so ubiquitous in all walks of life that living with failure is oppressive for those of us who do not become achieved celebrities. In extreme cases, people who do not attain achieved celebrity resort to violent behaviour in order to acquire acclaim. Chapter Four examines the relationship between notoriety and celebrity. It examines the role of the celebrity race in the growth of stalkers and makes connections between the search for celebrity and some forms of murder and serial killing.

In the final chapter I introduce the concept of the 'celebrification process' to encapsulate the ubiquitous character of celebrity in everyday

life. I argue that, with the growth of unified markets and a pervasive system of mass communication, culture has gradually become mediagenic. The evening news on TV brings together more people than all editions of the national newspapers combined. Everyday social and cultural exchange utilizes the styles, points of view, conversational prompts and steering agendas supplied by the media. Of course, these are inflected, revised and recast by the direct circumstances and relations of life in which we are located. None the less, it is reasonable to propose that media influence is a major factor in everyday inter-personal exchange; further, that celebrities are significant nodal points of articulation between the social and the personal. Hence, celebrity must be understood as a *modern* phenomenon, a phenomenon of mass-circulation newspapers, TV, radio and film.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu is caustic about the power of media celebrities. ‘Our news anchors’, he complains, ‘our talk show hosts, and our sports announcers ... are always telling us what we “should think” about what they call “social problems”, such as violence in the inner city or in the schools.’² One might object that this view is too one-dimensional. The influence of media celebrities is more nuanced, notably in respect of replenishing democracy through informing the public and renewing public accountability, than Bourdieu allows. Even so, his point – which is that popular and, to a large degree, personal culture is now mediagenic, both in respect of the presentation of personality in everyday exchange and the setting of life goals – is valid. Celebri-fication proposes that ordinary identity formation and general forms of social interaction are patterned and inflected by the styles, embodied attitudes and conversational flow developed through celebrity culture. Celebrities simultaneously embody social types and provide role models.

The fact that media representation is the basis of celebrity is at the heart of both the question of the mysterious tenacity of celebrity power and the peculiar fragility of celebrity presence. From the perspective of the audience, it makes celebrities seem, simultaneously, both larger than life

and intimate confrères. Staging presence through the media inevitably raises the question of authenticity. This is a perpetual dilemma for both the celebrity and the audience. Out-of-face encounters between celebrities and fans tend to produce three results. (By the term *out of face* I mean interaction between a celebrity and an audience in which the veridical self of the celebrity, or its lack, becomes ascendant, thus contradicting or disconfirming the pattern of expectations and reactions constructed around the public face.) The three results produced by this state of affairs are, first, *confirmation*, in which the public face of the celebrity is eventually regained and verified through direct interaction with fans. Second, *normalization*, in which celebrity status is rendered transparent through the articulation and recognition of common traits between the psychology and culture of celebrities and fans. By exposing the out-of-face side to personality, the celebrity momentarily becomes more like us. Recognition that celebrities are human after all often enhances public esteem. Elton John, Robert Downey Jr, Boy George and Judy Garland each seem to have developed closer relations with the public after confessing to their battles with addiction. The third result is termed *cognitive dissonance*, wherein encounters radically conflict with mass-media images of celebrity, exposing the public face to critical condemnation as a calculated facade or prop.

Ascribed, Achieved and Attributed Celebrity

Celebrity status comes in three forms: *ascribed*, *achieved* and *attributed*. Ascribed celebrity concerns lineage: status typically follows from bloodline. The celebrity of Caroline Kennedy or Prince William stems from their line of biological descent. It is why kings and queens in earlier social formations commanded automatic respect and veneration. Individuals may add to or subtract from their ascribed status by virtue of their voluntary actions, but the foundation of their ascribed celebrity is predetermined.

In contrast, *achieved* celebrity derives from the perceived accomplishments of the individual in open competition. For example, Brad Pitt, Damien Hirst, Michael Jordan, Darcy Bussell, David Beckham, Lennox Lewis, Pete Sampras, Venus and Serena Williams and Monica Seles are celebrities by reason of their artistic or sporting achievements. In the public realm they are recognized as individuals who possess rare talents or skills.

However, achieved celebrity is not exclusively a matter of special talent or skill. In some cases it is largely the result of the concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries. When this is so, it is *attributed* celebrity.

Why does celebrity follow from mere attribution? The main reason is the expansion of the mass-media. Sensationalism is the mass-media's response to the routines and predictabilities of everyday life. Daniel Boorstin coined the term 'pseudo-event' to refer to the arrangement of newsworthy events and personalities by publicists and newspaper editors.³ Sensationalism aims to generate public interest with the object of galvanizing public attention. Thus, 'ordinary' people, like the British TV gardener Charlie Dimmock, Luciana Morad, the mother of one of Mick Jagger's illegitimate children, and Mandy Allwood, the British mother who was pregnant with octuplets, are vaulted into public consciousness as noteworthy figures, primarily at the behest of mass-media executives pursuing circulation or ratings wars. Later I shall introduce the term *celetoid* to refer to a media-generated, compressed, concentrated form of attributed celebrity.

It is frequently argued that media saturation means we now live in the age of the pseudo-event, with the result that the line between fact and fiction, reality and illusion has been erased. Perhaps this argument is hyperbolic, since its credibility rests ultimately on the exposure of many media topics as nothing more than orchestrated pseudo-events and the celetoid as an effect of media strategy. Once we recognize attributed celebrity as a category, we disarm the argument that the line between real-

ity and illusion has been erased. Even so, the omnipresence of the mass-media require us to take the celetoid as an important category in contemporary culture.

One should add a caveat here. Of course, achieved celebrity pre-dated the rise of the mass-media. Bigots, forgers, criminals, whores, balladeers and thinkers have been objects of public attention since Greek and Roman times. They possessed what one might call *pre-figurative* celebrity status. That is, they were items of public discourse, and honorific or notorious status was certainly attributed to them. But they did not carry the illusion of intimacy, the sense of being an exalted confrère, that is part of celebrity status in the age of mass-media.

When strangers met John Wilmot, 2nd Earl of Rochester (1647–80), for the first time, they were generally unaware that they were in the company of a rake, a compulsive womanizer and the author of obscene satires against Charles II and his courtiers. These elements of the veridical self were secreted from the public view. As with nearly every pre-figurative celebrity, the fame of Rochester, who died young at 33 from syphilis, was posthumous. Arguably, historical figures like Rochester, Pocahontas, Titus Oates, Guy Fawkes, John Dee, Nell Gwyn and Gerard Winstanley enjoyed a measure of metropolitan celebrity in their lifetimes. But it was unevenly distributed. Its indispensable conduits were kinship and friendship circles and the possession of literacy. In contrast, the celebrity of the present age is ubiquitous, and possesses *élan vital* for a ravenous public audience. Unlike pre-figurative celebrity, the celebrity in contemporary society is accessible through internet sites, biographies, newspaper interviews, TV profiles, radio documentaries and film biographies. The veridical self is a site of perpetual public excavation.

Of course, celebrities often find this intrusive and, occasionally, insufferable. The desire that they mobilize in others is alienable. Strictly speaking, the public faces that celebrities construct do not belong to them, since they only possess validity if the public confirms them. The relationship of

esteem is also one of dependency. Perhaps this accounts for the higher than average levels of neurosis and mental illness found among the celebritariat. Celebrities are literally elevated in public esteem, which frequently contributes to personal problems as they struggle to be 'themselves' with their families. A celebrity whose public face is rejected may fall prey to feelings of anxiety and mortification.

The fact that celebrity status depends on public recognition is ironic. A regular complaint made by celebrities is that the public has no respect for privacy. At the height of her fame, Greta Garbo retired from film and justified her decision by repeating for decades the mantra 'I want to be alone.' John Lennon explained Beatlemania in Britain as a reason for moving to Manhattan in 1970. In New York he felt he could walk the streets without being mobbed, although not, as it happened, without being shot dead. The deaths of Garbo and Lennon licensed deeper excavations of the veridical self by the media, much of it questionable, and some of it unsavoury. However, like every celebrity in contemporary society, their private lives were already part of the public domain, part of the insistent cultural data that we use to comprehend ourselves and to navigate through the crashing waves of the cultural sphere. Those who are successful in following the path of achieved or attributed celebrity surrender a portion of the veridical self, and leave the world of anonymity and privacy behind.

Celetoids and Celeactors

I propose *celetoid* as the term for any form of compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity. I distinguish celetoids from celebrities because, generally, the latter enjoy a more durable career with the public. However, I take it for granted that many of the representational techniques that present celetoids and celebrities for public consumption are identical. Celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communications