

CELEBRITY: Facing your fifteen minutes of fame.

“I walked a pace behind you at the soundcheck
You had no real way of knowing
In my heart I cried “Take me with you,
I don’t care where you’re going...”

I touched you at the soundcheck
You’re just the same as I am
But what makes these people feel happy
Leads us headlong into harm.”

THE SMITHS: Paint a Vulgar Picture

Michael W. Jackson is an Australian academic with a celebrity name who teaches Politics at the University of Sydney. In his professional blog dated 28th January 2007, he coined the term ‘Celebricracy’ to describe “the domination of popular culture by people who are famous for being famous”. The entry is short, sweet and to the point.

Celebricracy

by Michael W Jackson

28 January, 2007

If the celebrities are leaders, who are their followers? And why?

"Celebricracy" is a word I have coined for the domination of popular culture by people who are famous for being famous. They rule the magazine racks in news agents, grocery stores, and the like. I see them as I wait to pay for the laundry detergent. I see them so often that I am sorry to say I recognize some. They rule the television air waves on the morning shows with their carefully managed infidelities, eccentricities, and fashions. This I know from watching the muted television screens in the gym as I push my twelve kilometers every second morning. No doubt they rule elsewhere, places that are mercifully unknown to me. Celebracrats are to be distinguished from people famous, at least in the first instance, for doing something. Excluded are the likes of Shane Warne (a genius with a cricket ball), David Beckham (who really could bend it like no other), Michael Jordan (a god who played basketball), Vanessa Williams (she really can hit that tennis ball), Angela Merkel (the German chancellor who proved housewives can make a second career), and so on. Of course, there are crossovers like Warne and Beckham whose fame started with the hard work of athletics and then transcended that into celebrisphere. What they have in common is quite simple, money. Enough of it to pursue this career of ephemera. Since none of them has ever worked, I notice that one fashion in clothing is work clothes. All rather like that French queen dressing in shepardess gear with dyed lambs. Look what happened to her.

(Gloss: the ephemeral is that which is meant to be used and

then discarded (newspapers are a simple example).

The queen who dressed as a shepherdess with dyed lambs was Marie Antoinette, who followed her husband to the guillotine in 1793.)

Jackson echoes many contemporary cultural commentators in his concerns about so-called 'Celebrity' and its corrosive influence on 'culture'. Celebrity culture is not our primary concern here but rather, in the context of the site 'The Person,' the ways in which celebrities represent their and our concerns. To do this though we must have a handle on what celebrity is and how it has changed. Certainly academic writing has massively increased and has significantly moved 'camps'/schools. Once the writing was in Film Studies where celebrity was synonymous with 'star' and the implications was that 'celebrity' was earned through endeavour, performance, participation. Now the focus is in Cultural Studies and most of the considered Celebrities are in no real sense stars, in fact the writing is less about celebrities than about 'celebrity' itself. Luckily for us the writing at both ends of this 'Journey' are highly relevant: from Richard Dyer's start to Ellis Cashmore's Celebrity Culture.

Clive James has argued that there was effectively no celebrity in the nineteenth century since the very idea of celebrity is predicated on the need for a mass media to provide "the oxygen of publicity" True, the likes of Lord Byron and Oscar Wilde had a kind of international fame but this largely wasn't a result of their work but rather their lives. You had to 'marry' your sister or get imprisoned for homosexuality in those days, now you'd be straight onto The Jeremy Kyle show. It seems then a simple but persuasive argument to see the steady increase in celebrities and our interest in them to be directly related to the increase and then exponential explosion of media forms, formats and channels. With 24 hour a day multi-channel TV the need for people to be on TV and achieve a little celebrity has massively increased. Andy Warhol predicted

fifteen minutes of fame for us all but perhaps even he could not have foreseen how quickly it would become more than a wisecrack.

Ellis Cashmore's seminal reading of David Beckham makes the case for Beckham as the father of modern celebrity. Beckham, Cashmore argues, has been turned into a product in an unprecedented way to a degree that what he does (plays football) is for less important than 'what he is' (his brand image). This means that his continued celebrity is not dependent on his being a top footballer but is rather more securely tied in to a weave of connected personae, which also makes his story more compelling. The truth is that he can do no wrong, escaping infidelity and pink nail varnish with comparative ease. Partly this is because he has a good story, which is a traditional one: "The Beckham fairy tale - which like all fairy tales embodies ideas about ourselves". Cashmore also identifies an advantageous historical context in which the Beckhams conveniently stood in for a floundering royal family. As Cashmore goes on, "The Beckham fairy tale... grew out of this fertile soil, a context in which people had lost trust in established traditional forms of authority, in which they no longer looked to monarchic, military, religious or political leaders for guidance and in which they found gratification in immersing themselves in the lives of glamorous and flamboyant celebs".

ACTIVITY

The Beckhams (the Davids, that is)

Cashmore argues "the Beckham fairy tale... embodies "ideas about ourselves".

Examine the mythic elements in the following images and exemplify them by given each both a descriptive and a provocative title.



However, though he may be ‘King’ in a world awash with celebrity wannabes, has-beens and never-weres, Beckham in most senses is nothing new. Though he may fit Daniel Boorstin’s perjorative “sign of celebrity”, “that his name is often worth more than his services”, at least his fame to a significant degree is a function of accomplishment. As such he is then like film stars of yesteryear as a set of signs that signify to us a set of meanings to which we have contributed. This way of treating stars was massively influenced by the work of Richard Dyer as indicated by this passage from Lee Grieveson’s ‘Stars and Audiences in Early American cinema’

Scholarly interest in star images has proliferated subsequent to Richard Dyer's important book Stars, which initiated a semiotic

notion that stars should be studied as clusters of signs, as systems of signifiers or texts, that communicate meaning to a spectator. These star texts are highly manipulated and have been fabricated through the work of the star, his or her representatives and other cultural workers (such as gossip columnists); for Dyer, star texts are produced across the categories of promotion, publicity, film texts and criticism and commentary.[10] Work on star images has increasingly sought to contextualise such images within larger discursive structures and within the broader parameters of social history, often taking a lead from Dyer's own subsequent work and in particular *Heavenly bodies: film stars and society* (1986) where Dyer sought to bring "together the star seen as a set of media signs with the various ways of understanding the world which influenced how people felt about that star." [11] For Dyer and others, stars thus become major definers of ideas about such things as gender, race, ethnicity, work and sexuality at historically specific moments. In this sense, stars are ideological images that work to resolve pressing ideological contradictions and in part to foster images of ideal selves that are promoted as sources of identification.[12]

There is so much here for us as Communication and Culture Students, not least the semiotic nature of the investigation of celebrity image. As Grieveson makes clear Dyer is keen to construct a model of star function which comprises;

Star/celebrity as a series of interlocking syntagms open to our interpretation as spectators.

An awareness that these 'texts' are manipulated both indirectly and directly by stars, their 'people' and other interested parties.

Than an awareness star/celebrity cannot be disconnected from a social, cultural and historical context (that celebrity can be read as a form of social and cultural history)

an understanding that celebrities provide a running

commentary on contemporary ideas about identity with

reference to such issues as gender, ethnicity and sexuality.

In *Heavenly Bodies* Dyer provides an extended study of the star identities of Marilyn Monroe. Dyer sites Monroe within the discourse of sexuality and femininity which was circulating in 1950s America. He argues that Monroe's "quivering, wriggling submissive sexuality" presented an unthreatening construction of female sexuality at a time when the popularity of psychoanalysis and opened the door to what Paul McDonald describes as "fears of the emergence of a female sexuality which might exist independently from male sexuality". Far from being a positive image of female sexual freedom, Monroe's bloneness and vulnerability connote a femininity which is dependent and willing.

Some parallels can be seen here with David Beckham's emergence as East London's least likely metrosexual. Partly prompted by Beckham's reputedly significant following among gay men, much has been written about the 'queering' of Beckham's image. In an article entitled 'Is Straight the new Queer?' and subtitled 'David Beckham and the Dialectics of Celebrity' Mohmin Rahman argues that images of Beckham "half naked and smothered in baby oil" or sporting pink nail varnish are merely manipulations to promote consumption. "Beckham's masculinity", he continues "can be read as a sign ...and remarked into a queer sign... But this is a simulation, not indicating any 'real' queering of either the subject or indeed of the assumed audience who have to make sense of the sign." In fact the whole paragraph is of some significance. "Rather, the potential to remark Beckham as 'queer' seems to indicate that whilst heterosexual masculinity can be a sign, so perhaps too does queer itself become a sign, similarly divorced from its traditional referents. The 'reality' is thus simulated through pre-determined codes of representation, and one such code seems to be that gender transgression is culturally significant. Dialectical signs are mapped onto a reality/hyper reality dynamic, with queerness presented knowingly as the hyper real – after all, the reality is that Beckham is 'so

obviously heterosexual...”

In both these cases there is a suggestion that celebrity is a powerful vehicle/instrument of hegemonic forces of the perpetuation of dominant ideology. In acting out the apparent struggles of individuality these special people show us ‘self-maintenance strategies’ which pointedly also maintain the status quo. They become leaders not because of their arguments but because of their otherness, their charisma, their almost godlike status.

ASIDE

Liz Taylor as goddess in CRASH

Max Weber described charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he(sic) is set apart from ordinary men and treated as if endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least superficially exceptional qualities”. Sam Goldwyn once said “God makes the stars. It’s up to the producers to find them” but Weber hints that maybe the ‘making’ is ours, the audience who ‘believe’. This is the dangerously fascinating quality that Morrissey is alluding to in this section’s opening quotation, the quality that “makes these people so happy” yet “leads us (all of us, star and fan perhaps) “headlong into harm”.

Moreover Richard Dyer argues that uncertain times, (like our own) are particularly susceptible to this ‘charisma’: “The charismatic appeal is effective especially when the social order is uncertain, unstable and ambiguous and when the charismatic figure or group offers a value, order or stability to counterpoise this” (Dyer stars p31)

Given what functions Dyer believes stars perform for us this might be particularly worthy of consideration.

“Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular

notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual'...they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it" (Film Resource p182)

ACTIVITY

"uncertain, unstable and ambiguous": the post-modern condition.

One thing that is prompted by these discussions is the particular relationship between Celebrities and what Lyotard called 'the Post Modern condition'. What might a post-modernist perspective offer to a reading of either Michael Jackson, Madonna, Amy Winehouse or Cristiano Ronaldo?

Now Monroe and Beckham are very much A list, a now popular term that has moved from its denotative meaning to describe journalist James Ulmer's literal A-list of most bankable Hollywood film stars. However we live in a world of minor celebrities where the term 'Z list' has needed to be brought in to indicate the marginality of some celebrity. This situation has partly been created, and certainly aggravated, by the popularity of 'reality TV', which for a glorious moment or two seemed to have substituted a fascination for 'ordinary people' doing ordinary things for our previous need for celebrity antics. Sadly before long we had turned these 'ordinary people' into celebrities and by doing so encouraged other 'ordinary people' that they too could become 'extraordinary'. Cue another key 'noughties' term 'celebrity wannabe' and the story of the rise and fall of Big Brother.

Even to its greatest supporters Big Brother is in a form of terminal decline, aggravated rather than alleviated by increasingly desperate attempts to make the show more

interesting. These attempts have only turned it into a freak show and further alienated the mainstream audience that made the early series such a television phenomenon. Channel 4 still describe it as a television event but it is an already tarnished tradition, perhaps inevitably so in this case since the novelty and innocence that typified the early series simply could not last. It is no longer enough to watch random collections of ordinary people interacting. What we crave is the eccentric, the manipulative, the desperate and ironically this is now best answered by minor celebrities. 'Reality' TV is now paradoxically synonymous with 'Celebrity TV' since our appetite for 'I'm a Celebrity get me out of here' or 'Strictly Come Dancing' has not waned in the period of Big Brother's terminal decline.

The kind of celebrities who subject themselves to the humiliation of Bush Tucker trials are all too often those who are 'famous for being famous' or famous for having been famous". The 'I'm a Celebrity...' franchise which at its height was boasting more votes than the Australian general election has a roster of winners which begs the question: "And what were they famous for then" and when?"

ACTIVITY

Who were they then and where are they now?

Who were these people and does it matter? Score one point for anything you can usefully add.

- 2001 Tony Blackburn
- 2002 Phil Tufnell
- 2003 Kerry Katona
- 2004 Joe Pasquale
- 2005 Carol Thatcher
- 2006 Matt Willis
- 2007 Christopher Biggins
- 2008 Joe Squash

With all respect the list above does not seem obviously given over to the “supernatural, superhuman or (even) superficially exceptional qualities”. These people in fact are only marginally “set apart from ordinary men” (by a TV company and a ‘bung’). As Turner points out in his book *Understanding Celebrity Culture*, “modern celebrity... is a product of media representation”. The cultural historian Daniel Boorstin defined a celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness”, a “human pseudo-event” made for us to offer his emptiness as an index of our own emptiness. Again without undue unfairness in the case of the almost oxymoronic sub-genre ‘Celebrity reality TV’ you can see Boorstin’s point but to dismiss all celebrity on the basis that some might not have earned it is surely to overstate the case.

The critic Neal Garner certainly thinks so and in his influential essay ‘Toward a new definition of Celebrity’ he painstakingly offers a much more positive take on Celebrity Culture and the functions it performs for us as individuals. He sees celebrity in a much more creative light and offers early on in the piece a provocative challenge to the culture pessimists.

It is entirely possible that celebrity, far from being a symptom of cultural degradation, is actually an art form wrought in the medium of life. More, on the evidence, it is even possible that celebrity is now our dominant art form, not only in the attention it demands or in the way it subjugates other media but in the way it seems to refract so many of the basic concerns of the culture, precisely as art does.

He then goes on to consider what makes a celebrity and concludes: “so what turns a famous person into a celebrity? Narrative... we are interested in their stories”. Garner’s own definition of celebrity is that it is simply “human entertainment”, “they are living our narratives that capture our interest and the interest of the media”. “What stars are to traditional movies,

celebrities are to the 'life movie'" Garner claims. Maintaining their narratives means maintaining their existence as celebrities which may become increasingly difficult given the need to be explicit, present and tangible. One of the pressures is that of being the person you say you are, what Garner calls "the congruence of the person and his narrative", while a prying media are always trying to catch you out. This is why Celebrity Big Brother is more compelling - these are people we 'know' and yet celebrity needs fans so it's a two edged sword. Morrissey again is brutal and honest;

"A list play list

Please them, please them

Sadly this was your life

But you could have said 'no' if you wanted to

You could have walked away, couldn't you?" (Paint a Vulgar Picture)

Essentially Garner is arguing that, as on at form, celebrity is essentially aesthetic, its narratives are good and bad only in so far as they are resonant (or not). Garner is effusive on the potential of celebrity narratives which "can reinforce fears and dreams, instruct and guide us, transport us from daily routine, reassure us that we are not alone in what we think and feel, impose order and experience". At the same time they enjoy an almost sanctified existence because they are also making a journey on our behalf while we watch/share/consume/enjoy them. These journeys are rarely easy and Garner concludes with the recognition that "Celebrity taps some of the deepest contradictions about who we are and who we'd like to be"