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11 The Sphinx of Celebrity and the Idolatry Funfair

The early Victorian essayist William Hazlitt (1930) published a piece, originally in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1826, on 'Of Persons one would have wished to have Seen'. It is an interesting document for our purposes because it directly addresses the question of celebrity, before the emergence of the fully developed PR-Media hub. It is a light piece that takes the form of a meandering, after-dinner table talk between Hazlitt and others, over cake and brandy, on the subject of famous historical figures whom one would wish to have encountered. Predictably, most of the figures nominated are writers: Dante, Sir Thomas Browne, Fulke Greville, John Donne, Dr Johnson, Geoffrey Chaucer, Alexander Pope, William Shakespeare and John Dryden. Although Oliver Cromwell is also mentioned for 'his fine, frank, rough, pimply face and wily policy' (Hazlitt, 1930: 532), there are surprisingly few requests to meet political leaders, military campaigners, actors, actresses and the like. This reflects the high status assigned to fiction, poetry and belles-lettres among the arts in Hazlitt's time.

Dante apart, the list strikes us today as narrowly British. At this time, national traditions of cultural appreciation, no less than artistic production, were clearly ascendant. Western nations were beginning to define themselves by the perceived threats to domestic interests. These interests were not necessarily common or, still less, shared in any conscious way (Colley, 2009). Inter alia, they referred to the preoccupations of the monarchy, the aristocracy, the landed gentry and the rising industrial-urban propertied class, rather than to land labourers and the industrial working class.

This is in sharp contrast with the contemporary perspective on celebrity. Today celebrity culture is global and ecumenical. National traditions are not necessarily privileged. Recognition of glamour and achievement is drawn from around the world. Celebrity culture resembles an enormous, global washing machine in which different data from the world swirl around in perpetual motion. Altogether, it reflects a massive expansion in the arc of cultural appreciation that would have seemed amiss and unpatriotic in the eyes of Victorian and Edwardian cultural critics.

Hazlitt and his party were culturally literate men, active at a time when education was available to only a few. So cultural literacy was scarce. Hazlitt himself, and

one of his guests, Charles Lamb, made their living by their pens. Their reading and debates equipped them with ample knowledge of literature, philosophy, science, history and the disciplines devoted to studying the mind and human relationships. It follows, that there is little reason to be surprised that the names submitted should consist largely of famous, long-dead British authors. These would be exactly the writerly ideals and role models for culturally literate people of Hazlitt's day.

Strikingly, Hazlitt discounts John Locke and Isaac Newton as worthy candidates since 'beyond the contents [of their writings] there is nothing personally interesting in the men' (Hazlitt, 1930: 524). This suggests that celebrity is not just about deeds, but also about *personality*. Tzvetan Todorov argues that a characteristic of Enlightenment thought is that it sought to understand individual men and women in 'particular situations' (Todorov, 2010: 9). Instead of pursuing the classical ideal of revealing the 'eternal laws' of human conduct and the 'exemplary character' of each action, Enlightenment thinkers were interested in the 'ordinary gestures' of exceptional and unexceptional human beings. Personality was slowly being acknowledged as the key to celebrity.

This interest in personality was not truly modern. Educated people in ancient and traditional society were interested not only in the deeds of Alexander the Great, Caesar, Cicero, Cleopatra, King John, Queen Elizabeth and other ascribed celebrities. They were also interested in them as people with particular attitudes, emotions, quirks, strengths of character and failings. What made the Enlightenment different is that these interests were transferred and expanded to refer to men and women from ordinary backgrounds, who, through their exceptional achievements, became objects of fame. There was a pedagogic element in this.

Ordinary men and women could study the character of Caesar or Queen Elizabeth. But they had no chance of ever becoming either an emperor or a monarch. However, in studying what made Rousseau great or how Thomas Paine came to formulate his views, ordinary men and women could assimilate personality traits and character strengths that would make them better, more effective, rounded personalities. Ascribed celebrities in ancient and traditional society were distant role models. Achieved celebrities after the age of the Enlightenment were role models *and* life coaches, equipping stargazers and members of the ordinary public with the people skills that enabled them to make a practical difference in their own lives. What *works* for celebrities could now be used to work for any Tom, Dick or Harry in their own walks of life.

Again, in this regard, the importance of Boswell's *Life of Johnson* (1791) cannot be underestimated. It provided a benchmark for biography by using private impressions and personal anecdotes to enhance the public image of its subject. Boswell gave the public the intimation of getting behind the public view of Samuel Johnson to render a definitive picture of the great man (Sisman, 2000).

Hazlitt and his dinner party would have been alive to this innovation in biography. By acquainting themselves with the private lives of celebrities and linking these details to their public, recorded deeds, they believed that they would gain illumination about those who are truly great. Nonetheless, at the same time, they believed that there is something evasive and mysterious about achieved celebrity. It is one thing for Boswell to reveal illuminating characteristics of Johnson's life, but something Sphinx-like about Johnson remains.

There was a puzzle about the phenomenon of celebrity. It resided in two areas: the secrets of the formation of the star personality from ordinary clay and why some stars implode while others endure. Fame was not just about deeds and personality. It was about the relationship between stars and the use of the biography of fame to shape the time.

This made achieved celebrity into something otherworldly, Sphinx-like and mysterious. Perhaps it reflected the origins of fame in long-forgotten forms of totemism and the primitive notion of the divinity of kings. Achieved celebrities may reveal more about their personalities, they may offer ordinary people lifestyle tips and people skills, but they remain consummate mysteries. So that when one encounters a famous achieved celebrity by chance, even today, one is dazed as if touching a source of energy that is not present in everyday life.

The public celebrity

Our own day may still be dazed by celebrity but it is less willing to see anything of the Sphinx in celebrity culture. Today, it is common for us to feel entitled to know *everything* about the private lives of celebrities. The PR-Media hub satisfies the insatiable public demand for the real person behind the celebrity mask. Cosmetic surgery, food preferences, phobias, political opinions, school memories, relationships with parents and children, exercise habits, favourite brands of toothpaste or shampoo – everything is grist to the mill. Nor is there any sense of balance. Public interest in the private lives of the stars is equivalent, and often disproportionate, to the content of the deeds that made celebrities famous. It is as if it is taken for granted that fame neutralizes any right of celebrities to retain privacy. In putting themselves before the public as figures of note, the celebrity is taken to serve notice that every scintilla of their life is up for grabs. Although the question of the invasion of privacy is at the heart of celebrity culture, the general view appears to be that celebrities are fair game. The notion of building an exclusive, private relationship with the celebrity now seems cranky. It is the stuff of extreme celebrity worship syndrome and pathological narcissistic idealization. From the mean standpoint, celebrities are viewed as the property of the *polis*. Everyone has a right to a piece of the action.

Nor are achieved celebrities today conventionally regarded as universally belonging to a superior (higher) world. A more equivocal relationship between the stargazer and the star prevails. Stars are presented in the media and understood by the public to be prey to the same anxieties, neuroses and perturbations of spirit as ordinary men and women. The personality is no longer separated from culture and society as it was in Hazlitt's day. Personal details humanize stars by making them appear, on one level, to be just like everyone else. This is transparently the case with celestoids, who are perceived as, often grotesque, versions of Everyman. But nowadays the cultural distance between superstars and society is also seen as drastically reduced. The superstar possesses talents and accomplishments that are not distributed in the mass. Nonetheless, the fact that they hail from the ranks of ordinary people and are vulnerable to the same battery of psychological, social and cultural challenges that we all face, is an important part of the appreciation process. We learn through *their* struggle.

This has an important consequence for how celebrity is positioned before audiences and fans. We have shifted from a perspective that seeks to discover definitive, final readings of celebrities, to one in which fame is viewed as perpetually changing in form. Nothing is any longer set in stone. For example, Peter Ackroyd's renowned biography of Charles Dickens (1991) was presented by the publishers as an unsurpassable achievement in understanding the great man.

However, it has spawned a lively counter biographical literature that seeks to expose the faults and gaps in Ackroyd's account. Thus, Lillian Nayder's biography (2010) of Dickens's wife, Catherine Hogarth, is entitled *The Other Dickens*, implicitly suggesting that existing accounts of the writer that focus on genius and personality, rather than the relationship of genius and personality to primary relationships and society at large, are distorted and one-sided. The book aims to reclaim Catherine as a seminal, misunderstood and poorly remembered influence on Dickens's life and writing. The accent is now upon challenging the facade of fame. Achieved celebrity is understood to be intrinsically a matter of talent, accomplishment and *representation*. The facade of celebrity is commonly regarded as a PR-Media related mask that needs to be resisted. Celebrities are themselves caught up in the public mania to dispel the public face and flourish insights about the self behind the mask.

Hence, Tom Cruise's (2005) disastrous appearance on *Oprah*, and Tiger Woods's (2010) public TV confession of deceit and adultery, overturned long-standing assumptions and violently changed popular perspectives. Cruise could no longer be accepted as the movie-star master of self-control and buttoned-up discretion; while Woods kissed goodbye to his highly lucrative public image as an incorruptible, clean-cut sports hero. Yet a superstar as well versed and adept in

public presentation as Cruise surely knew what he was doing, even if he misjudged the payoff; while Woods must have known that he was playing with fire in denying allegations of infidelity. Perhaps both had grown weary of the hall of mirrors of celebrity culture and a tiny, unfulfilled part of them wanted to break free from the celebrity straitjacket and be acknowledged for who they really are.

Who can say? What is beyond reasonable doubt, is that only the naive in the *polis* believed that the real men behind the celebrity facade were thus revealed. In media-saturated cultures, there is no authoritative core to celebrity, only the constant ebb and flow of the celebrity image. When we ask who was the 'real' figure behind a celebrity supernova, we are unable to supply a satisfying answer. The 'real' John Lennon, Bob Marley, Marlon Brando, Kurt Cobain, Elizabeth Taylor or Michael Jackson remains elusive. Interestingly, the development of the celebrity image of these stars shows no sign of abating. For example, the 'real' circumstances of Jackson's sudden death became an issue almost as soon as his death certificate was signed. The public had been used to viewing Jackson as wacky, out of touch with reality, spoiled and mixed up in sinister ways with children. Now, overnight, he was redefined as a media victim, a lamb slaughtered by the malevolence of the fame industry. There is no 'truth' here, but rather an array of competing representations, none of which is unifying. Similar questions derive from John Lennon's involvement with violent, militant groups and his hounding by the CIA as an 'undesirable' alien. Was Lennon a covert supporter of terrorism to advance the cause of liberation? Did he see this as the price to pay for building a society of 'no possessions'? Or was he a well-meaning political halfwit, gulled into supporting causes that he did not fully understand and activists who pulled the wool over his eyes?

When Elizabeth Taylor died in 2011, tribute programmes and obituaries referred to her as the 'last of the real stars'. By this was meant that her fame was formed in an era of Hollywood when stars had to be remote from the world of ordinary men and women. They were required to obey the law of being more beautiful, more pure, more steadfast, fitter, more health-conscious, kinder, better with their children, more heroic and energetic than ordinary men and women. The law, of course, was an absurdity concocted by the Hollywood dream machine. Taylor's own life, with eight marriages (she married Richard Burton twice), ill health, depression, struggles with weight, battles with alcohol and drugs, was hardly conducted with the gods on Mount Olympus free from the tawdry complaints and miserable temptations that afflicted mere mortals. The obituaries and tribute shows did not stint in recounting disclosures of personality and life history that revealed her to be a victim of consumerism, double-talk, unhealthy obsessions and damaging addictions, just like the rest of us.

In becoming relentlessly more public, is celebrity culture killing the goose that lays the golden egg? If we become aware of how like us they really are, why should we any longer see celebrities as elevated, incandescent beings? Take away the mystery behind celebrity and you remove its power to bewitch.

But the *raison d'être* of celebrity is not the capacity of the PR-Media hub to persuade us that celebrities are special, nor is it our admiration of the skills and accomplishments that we see in individual celebrities. The *raison d'être* lies elsewhere. It rests in the human need for transcendence. The sheer transcendence of fame over ordinary life and the different aspects of the celebrity image, represented in the various pictorial, aural and written texts devoted to celebrity, provides most of us with pleasurable involvement and drives some to the obsessional behaviour characteristic of celebrity worship syndrome and narcissistic idealization. This reflects an important transformation in the relationship between the audience and the celebrity since Hazlitt's day. Popular participation with media representations of celebrity is now continuous. Over the last thirty years it has been 'naturalized'. The media has become our second skin. We do not need to burrow for celebrity news or titbits. Rather, they are *drilled* into us perpetually via multiple commercial media channels. This is noteworthy. It is tantamount to silently recognizing that most people understand, without necessarily consciously acknowledging, that the inevitable corollary of celebrity is the PR-Media hub. We take for granted the vast global information highways that transport truckloads of celebrity data. We find nothing remarkable in our familiarity with the private lives and public careers of stars. Quite simply, today, more people know more about celebrities, living or dead, than at any point in human history. This is the direct result of the gigantic multiplication of supply outputs, namely celebrity TV shows, celebrity TV channels, celebrity podcasts, celebrity biographies, celebrity magazines and celebrity gossip columns. Undeniably, the expansion of supply side factors since the 1980s has contributed to make celebrity ubiquitous.

Celebrity and the need for transcendence

Nonetheless, it really is untenable to explain celebrity culture merely, or even primarily, in terms of supply side factors. Celebrity culture is ubiquitous because it affords access to the deep human need for transcendence and meaning. The PR-Media hub is as caught up in this as much as stars and stargazers. In premodern society, the body, the community, society and the whole world are regarded to follow the plan of Creation. In modern society, science, technology and commerce have led to the fragmentation and decline of cosmological values. Over the whole of society, their force is much diminished. For most people today, the body is without

religious significance. God is not respected as an influential presence in human life. To be sure, in some quarters, among relatively large numbers of people, belief in deities, totems, spirits and magic survives. But the majority of men and women are agnostic. They prefer to let their beliefs reside in the testable propositions of science, medicine and technology.

Yet the need for transfigured experience and the memory of transhuman rituals survives and flourishes. John Castles is hardly alone in noting the occurrence of states of 'ecstasy' and 'revelation' in rock and popular music concerts (John Castles, 2008: 63; see *also* Wilson, 1975). The outstretched hands of the crowd, or the lighting-up of lighters, are the physical representation of the yearning for, and recognition of, a bigger, higher spiritual whole.

Similar states of being are claimed for mass sporting events, some television shows and the cinema. To go into this matter fully would require another book. However, common observation of celebrity culture quickly leads to the hypothesis that spectator sport, music concerts and music festivals and cinema seem to operate with models of transcendence that contain memory traces of abolished religious events and totemic rituals. Celebrity is associated with elevation, just as worship of the totem or the divine rights of kings was associated with higher life. Participation in celebrity culture requires fans to go through initiation rites and rites of passage. At the simplest level, fans escape from time. They live under a different metric governed by transcendent engagement with the celebrity rather than the laws of chronology and Nature. But the labour of following a celebrity provides a discipline and purpose to individuals that echoes religious meaning. This is reflected in dress, cosmetics, the organization of speech patterns, the development of political and spiritual belief systems, identification with various celanthropic causes, the belief in a higher purpose to life and much else besides.

The landscape of celebrity culture is full of echoes of religious memories and impressions of half-forgotten totemic ritual. Film, television, sport and popular music play with the motifs of the struggle between good and evil, the gaining of knowledge through ordeals, the quest for purity, the mysteries of transformation, the difference between the world and paradise and wholeness and the interactions between heroes, demons, princesses, maidens and trusty friends (Payne, 2000; Hedges, 2010). So Jake Gyllenhaal plays the heroic Prince Dastan who, in a quest for the Dagger of Time, falls in love with Princess Tamina in Disney's *Prince of Persia* (2010). Or Nicholas Cage plays the sorcerer, Balthazar Blake, in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (2010) and recruits Dave Stutler (Jay Baruchel) to save New York from the powers of darkness. The British Heavyweight boxer David Haye, the Filipino boxer and politician Manny Pacquiao; the tennis stars Roger Federer, Rafael Nadal and Serena Williams; and the soccer stars Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo are portrayed

in the media as heroes engaged in quests for success who are willing to endure ordeals against foes. These contemporary film plots and sporting narratives draw on our pagan and religious past, recycling character types, redefining set pieces and rebooting sacred rituals so that their origins become almost unrecognizable. But once the link between religion, totemism and contemporary rituals of celebrity is made, it does not require much perspicacity to detect the ghosts within.

Celebrity culture offers a multicoloured cloak of transcendence to a world habituated to the centuries-long waning of cosmology. Narcissistic idealization and hero worship have their roots in the human need for elevated, transcendent forms of meaning. The desire for larger-than-life versions of ourselves, or superhuman gods, leads to the birth of stars. Because the majority in society are obliged to be self-controlled, to be sexually prudent, to minimize risks and to put aside pennies for a rainy day, the image of a frontier existence, conducted on the edge, elevated from ordinary experience, in which the delight of boldness and carefree living are unapologetically stressed and celebrated, is intoxicating. Transcendence here refers not only to a larger-than-life existence, but also to freedom from the moral codes and economic constraints that regulate ordinary life.

Celanthropy intensifies these developments. It is only natural to want to make a difference. But celebrities seem to live with the supreme confidence that the world would be an inconsolably poorer place without them and that what they do carries global significance. Small wonder that they arouse acclaim, provoke identification and generate indignation and disapproval in comparable measure. Stars who pack stadiums on Saturday, generate millions at the box office every year and, in their free time, use their power to bring relief to the Third World are the big citizens that most of us secretly want to be. Just as surely as their willingness to speak on behalf of mankind is sometimes abhorred as unspeakable arrogance and their personal wealth is rejected for making them cocksure and vain.

The fear of idolatry

Fame is indeed often twinned with contamination. Celestoids and achieved celebrities, who spend a good deal of their pre-fame existence coveting acclaim, frequently seem at a loss to manage it when it comes. Far from producing the elevation of spirit and the consolidation of self-worth that is associated with transcendence, fame is experienced as a burden and sometimes a curse. This is a consequence that is keenly felt in the public mind and actively fanned by some sections of the media.

What evidence can be marshalled in support of this hypothesis? Take the case of Anna Nicole Smith. It is not exactly self-evident that Smith coveted celebrity.

She was certainly aware of her physical charms and used them to become a *Playboy* centrefold. She certainly understood the connection between sexual allure and acquiring a fortune. But the evidence that she sought out a wealthy suitor is not strong. Smith appears to have been hunted, rather than to have taken the path of the hunter. An octogenarian oil baron, J. Howard Marshall II, became smitten with her when she worked as a stripper in a Houston adult club. He eventually proposed. The two were married in 1994.

This should have been Anna Nicole's triumph. In fact, it is now widely held to be the start of her downfall and demise. Marshall, who was sixty-three years older than Smith, died within thirteen months of the marriage. Smith claimed half of his \$1.6 billion estate. This precipitated a bloody and protracted series of court proceedings between her and the Marshall Estate that continues to this day. Smith was dragged through the mincer by the media, who portrayed her as a gold-digger. She seemed visibly unable to cope with the strain and tension of the relentless court proceedings and media muckraking. Her public life became more erratic and suggested severe difficulties in her private life. Her fledgling film career constantly misfired. She became a face on the 'Events' circuit and a perpetual item in the gossip columns. The media circulated stories of her as a talentless, but striking wannabe. She rapidly adopted the persona of a long-life celestoid, a model and TV personality addicted to, and produced by, the PR-Media hub and driven to ever more desperate fame-spikes to keep her face and name in the public eye.

In 2002 her reality TV show, *The Anna Nicole Show*, debuted on the *E!* cable channel. It positioned her as a dizzy blonde who was not in control of her life and who seemed emotionally damaged and out of sorts with the trappings of Hollywood lifestyle. Like the more successful reality TV show, *The Osbournes*, the *Anna Nicole Show* positioned the protagonist as a sort of holy fool, apparently oblivious to the absurdity of her life and oddball status.

Media stories of Smith's dependency on drugs and alcohol created the widespread public impression that she was doomed. The public recognizes morbid romance as being destroyed by the same gods who rewarded you with excess and gratified your every whim. Even if Smith gained control of a large chunk of the Marshall Estate, she was portrayed as a profoundly lost character. Her death, from an accidental drug overdose, in 2007 was not unexpected. To be sure, it was not difficult to detect a sense of righteous fatefulness about her drug overdose, as if she had paid the price for the Icarus complex.

The repeated public reaction to a celebrity elevation without trace is to await the inevitable descent and falling. The baying of the media, and the public's appetite for descent and falling in celebrity status, echoes the war against the idols in

Christianity. We look for defects in the facade and for personal character flaws in those who have a brush with fame. The media participates in this by mounting the idolatry funfair. Undercover investigative journalists, muckrakers, phone-tappers and computer hackers regularly engage in illegal activities to outwit celebrity exposure management strategies. Newspaper and TV stories about the cracks in the celebrity facade are paraded before a gluttonous public. The media has developed various entrapment strategies to expose celebrity sexual misdemeanours, drug issues, alcohol dependency and violence. The main justification is that the public interest is being served. However, the most prominent interests are newspaper and magazine circulation figures and the ratings wars.

The compulsion to bring down achieved celebrities and celestoids is hardly new. The ordeal of descent and falling is a seminal primitive myth. In the Judean tradition, Lucifer's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden and Cain's slaying of Abel are classic examples. In both instances, forbidden actions bring disgrace and punishment. The corruption of nature, abhorred, but assimilated by a merciful God, paves the way to rites, festivals and rituals of redemption and ascent. The Oriental tradition, which holds that introversion is the road to truth, is rejected as a delusion. Salvation requires public redemption to overcome the original sin. The Judean and Christian instrument of redemption is to act upon the world in order to transform it in one's own image. This is what achieved celebrity superstars do. Through their deeds, they provide intimations of transcendence and models of practice that ordinary men and women can appreciate and follow.

Good and evil derive from the same source, namely God. For, in creating mankind, God equips us with the potential to take the path of righteousness or to stray. The authenticity of transcendence is a pivotal issue in Byzantine, Muslim and Christian traditions. The outbreaks of iconoclasm in these traditions are part of the vehement and intransigent revolt against idols. Just as good and evil are regarded as springing from the same source, the true and virtuous are regarded as being integrally joined with the base and the false.

I have already touched upon the theological doctrines behind this in Chapter 7. I am raising them here again because the modern idolatry funfair carries unmistakable echoes of puritan disapproval of the luxury of fame. It is driven by the urge to expose stars as fakes. Undue media attention is focused upon the vulnerabilities and bad habits of the famous. The use of entrapment strategies treads a narrow line between enticing celebrities to behave badly and merely faithfully representing their flaws and defects.

The counter-world of narcissistic idealization in celebrity culture is to treat celebrities as if they are just like us. However, the idolatry funfair is disproportionately obsessed with bringing celebrities down to earth and making sure that their

vulnerabilities receive their just desserts. At its worse, it is a pernicious distortion of fame that is no better than narcissistic idealization and hero worship. Indeed, it is part of the same syndrome that has placed the business of celebrity at the forefront of our culture, taking up the equivalent amount of airtime and column inches to news and opinions about politics, the economy, medical research, science, the arts and the like. The question is, has this really gone too far?

Conclusion: 'When You Wish Upon A Star...'

The old Harline and Washington song 'When You Wish Upon A Star' was first used in the Disney movie *Pinocchio* (1940). The Jiminy Cricket character sings it in the opening credits. Over the years, the song has gone on to become a trademark of the Disney Corporation, widely used in product placement and advertising campaigns.

The fable of *Pinocchio* is an apposite metaphor for the story of achieved celebrity and celestoid culture. A wooden puppet is miraculously transformed into a living thing and is informed that if he wants to be a real boy he must prove himself by his deeds. This anonymous person from society is identified by the PR-Media hub, elevated into public prominence and prevailed upon to be a heroic role model and unofficial life coach for the people. 'Ours must be a leadership democracy,' wrote Bernays, 'administered by the intelligent minority who knows how to regiment and guide the masses' (Bernays, 1928: 127).

Bernays and his followers were right to maintain that complex societies, organized around democracy, require more than words, laws and a financial surplus to run smoothly. They need glamorous figureheads whose presence persuades, enlivens and entreats the masses to greater things. But it is bad propaganda to argue, as Bernays does, that, at its best, the PR-Media hub does no more than this. For the PR-Media hub is judged not simply by its output in making democracy more perfect, but also by the private interests of the business executives, government officials and corporate stockholders that it serves. The growing importance of celebrity culture for capitalism in reproducing order and maximizing accumulation has allowed the genie to escape from the bottle. The popular desire for fame now precedes, and is often disturbingly indifferent to, questions of talent, accomplishment, dedication and skill. Narcissistic idealization and hero worship have transformed recognition and acclaim into popular entitlements. There is ambivalence about celestoid culture and the idolatry funfair, but there is no serious attempt to curtail or eliminate these features from the face of society. The only meaningful form of regulation advocated is self-regulation. But what does self-regulation mean in a celebrity culture in which optimizing impact is the name of the game?

The culture of fame is now as fundamental to the wellbeing of capitalism as is oil and nuclear energy. But just as pollution and environmental degradation is associated with the latter, so it is with the former. Fame culture produces fame attack in which the desire for celebrity results in obsessional personalities and dangerously skewed types of behaviour. A sizeable proportion of those touched by the hand of fame end up as prima donnas, or corrosive, pampered princes and little princesses who think nothing of dealing with the dilemmas of personality distortion by throwing tantrums, abusing others and resorting to acts of self-harm as a form of penance or a way of coping. We have seen that their mortality rate is higher than the mean, and that they are more prone to mental collapse, emotional disturbance and physical injury.

But the perils of celebrity are not confined to the famous. In as much as we live in an age of achievement famine, in which the urge for fame is general, but the conditions for its attainment are meagre, fame attack affects ordinary people in ways that we do not fully comprehend. We know about celebrity worship syndrome and have studied it in this book. But the costs of living in a culture in which social impact for the majority is out of reach, where commodified magnetism is frequently mistaken for charisma, and a sense of popular fraternization is mediated through commercialized para-social relationships (*Pop Idol*, *The X Factor*, *Got Talent*, *Big Brother*) are tricky to estimate. No one can survive comfortably or prosper in society without effective self-presentation. But in a culture where facade and impact are kings, and a belief in oneself regardless of talent or accomplishment is no longer regarded as impudent, genuine modesty, humility and balance have become handicaps to achievement. Meretricious conduct gets noticed, even if it also elicits criticism and disapproval. Look at the astonishing success of Lady Gaga.

But what if standing out in a crowd disassociates oneself from the concerns, values and interests of the crowd? What if leaders and figureheads really do regard their fellow men as a herd, in Bernays's sense of the term (Bernays, 1928)? What if wanting to be noticed drifts over into demanding acclaim and reverence as non-negotiable entitlements? What if the only sincerity recognized as 'working' is spray-on and cosmetic? Celebrity culture produces shining stars to follow, but it also unleashes many demons.

Mostly, when we wish upon a star, our dreams do not come true. The more we put into worshipping a celebrity, the less space we have for developing as an independent person. Celebrity is necessary to provide us with a sense of transcendence, especially in societies in which organized religion is a weaker force than it used to be. But there is no point in denying that it extends and reinforces the culture of dependency, where people look up to others rather than to themselves, and where PR images, celebrity endorsement and marketing sound bites are allowed

to do your thinking for you. Adding to the fame of others saps us of the energy that should be used for self-knowledge and social responsibility. Being born again by latching on to a star in celebrity culture is to voluntarily submit to a kind of modern serfdom. The serfdom in question is the bondage to consumer culture, where branding stands in for personal presence and packaging becomes the primary and salient form of cultural experience. When Angelina Jolie and George Clooney tell you what cause to follow and what charity to give tax-deductible donations to in the morning; when Jay-Z and Kanye West show you what shirts and cologne to wear in the afternoon; and when Natalie Portman is unveiled as the new (desired) face of Dior, and Rihanna fronts a new ad for Reb'l Fleur perfume in the evening, for you to follow and buy, what is left of the person under such conditions?

Despite condescension in the media and alarm in the public, celebrity culture is not going to go away. We need to stop thinking of it as trivial and compartmentalized from the rest of life. There are ways in which it can be used to enhance democracy and personal well-being. But there are also ways in which it is used to gull consumers into mindless emulation and develop a fixation with form over content, which contributes to dehumanization and toxic social life.

Fame has been described as a spur.¹ It is also a slip-on boot, stamping on the face of independence to demand conformity, and substituting real life with vicarious existence that is ultimately empty and unfulfilling. It is wise to take celebrity culture seriously because its effects permeate deep into our subconscious. The PR-Media hub that boosts its profile in society and positions it to sell products and politics to us has become so artfully adept that we have stopped noticing its presence. Celebrity culture is 'normal' in everyday life and the PR-Media hub is the 'natural' means of communicating fame to the public. However, the 'invisible government' of business and political interests and 'people-skills' professionals, who are ultimately behind the culture, are acutely conscious of its seductive power and potential for exerting social control. That is why they devote substantial corporate revenues and government reserves to the task of exploiting and developing celebrity throughout the *polis*. Only outwardly is celebrity culture about selling things. At the heart of the matter is a battle for the mind. Those who see celebrity only in terms of harmless fun or exuberant liberation, without recognizing its immense power for codifying personality and standardizing social control, do not see celebrity at all.