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8 Para-social Relationships

The inflation of celebrity culture owes much to the social context in which it emerged and flourished. How might we characterize this context? There have been numerous attempts to pin down the main features of modern life compared with conditions in traditional society. It would be laborious, and, to be sure, a needless diversion, to go into the details again here.¹ What emerges most forcefully is that modern life has many conditions that render it peculiarly susceptible to *intimacy between strangers*.

Richard Schickel (1975) gets it right, when he posits that this is the crux of celebrity culture. Our reliance upon truth and opinion through visual culture rather than face-to-face contact; the geographic and social mobility which tears us away from our roots; the strains of family life, reflected in high rates of divorce and the expansion in numbers of children with antisocial attitudes; the growth of flexitime, working from home, Web labour and flexible lifestyles, which multiply diversity and variation in everyday life and weaken the traditional notion of community – these are some of the chief conditions to which commentators like Schickel refer. They are associated with specific psychological and cultural effects. Geographic and social mobility slackens the hold of community ties and renders the extended family mostly invisible.

Ernest Gellner captured this condition of life very well when he wrote:

Optional human relations in fluid sub-communities have become – at any rate for members of the white collar classes and upward in affluent liberal societies – the very centre of life, the area where happiness or misery is decided; and they are menacing, incomprehensible and uncontrollable. To face them without support or solace is unthinkable. Yet where can we turn? (Gellner, 1985: 36–7)

In Gellner's day, and to his evident aggravation, he judged the first important port of call for support and solace to be psychiatry. Gellner was a master thinker, albeit occasionally an unjust and cantankerous critic. His squib is designed to expose what he took to be the shallow pretensions of the psychiatric profession. Whether or not this is a worthy goal is beyond the scope of this book. What we can say is that we contemporaries do not necessarily turn to psychiatry as the first port of call for support and solace. In the wrap-around, 24-hour media world we look elsewhere: celebrity culture. The *abgott* offer escapism, life-coaching and presumed intimacy in lives floating in – to repeat Gellner's phrase – 'fluid sub-communities'.

The notion of presumed intimacy between strangers is enormously fruitful for understanding modern celebrity culture. We live in an era of para-social relationships. That is overlying the primary relationships of family and community, we inescapably enter into webs of intimacy with celebrities that are based on impersonal print, photographic and electronic systems of communication. If the conditions are amenable, we connect with these prominent media figures as people in the know, learned commentators, holy fools, victims who require our help (if only they knew), people who we would like to be, beautiful people, friends. The rub is that our knowledge of these stars is mostly second hand and, further, we are usually total strangers to them.

Celebrity power ultimately depends upon the acclaim of fans. However, despite participating in blog sites, interviews, fan conventions and press events, stars maintain considerable spatial and social distance from fans. The essence of the star is to be out of the reach of ordinary people. Characteristically, it is mostly a one-sided, non-reciprocal relationship. For all the inside dope, the tales of chance meetings, the bits and bobs from Web chat rooms that afford fans the secrets and low-down on celebrity culture, the balance of power in information and opinion shaping is overwhelmingly in the hands of the celebrity and the adjoining PR-Media hub.

In the period before electronic communication, print culture provided glimpses of neurotic and obsessional tendencies in fans. From time to time, celebrity authors and national politicians were certainly plagued by adoring fans who supposed that, by virtue of being familiar with their words in print, they were on intimate terms with them. Abraham Lincoln deliberately exploited this intimacy for publicity purposes in his meetings with ordinary people in Washington during the conduct of the Civil War, as did Charles Dickens in his famous reading tours of Britain and America in which he portrayed characters from his fiction to adoring fans.

But the transition to visual culture vastly enlarged and greatly intensified the phenomenon. The electronic media have normalized para-social relationships. Now, it is as natural for infants to solidify emotional and psychological attachments and seek role models in Britney or Paris, as it is to form bonds of love with their brothers and sisters and look up to their parents. Understandably, the situation breeds confusion about lines of authority, systems of truth and contours of belonging.²

The term 'para-social relationships' captures this complex set of developments. It was coined by Horton and Wohl and refers to 'the illusion of face-to-face relationships with the performer' (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 35). The power and clarity of Horton and Wohl's discussion of this branch of celebrity culture reflects an engagement with forms of televisual self-promotion and impression management that were brand new at the time. The 1950s decade was the moment of the birth of new public personalities like continuity staff, chat-show hosts, weather forecasters,

newsreaders, as well as TV playlet, comedy and soap stars. For Horton and Wohl, the new presenters did not usually promote themselves as truly larger than life stars. These promotional devices were mainly employed in other branches of the entertainment sector, particularly the Hollywood film industry. Rather, the first wave of TV celebrities typically adopted the personae of peers. They used the model of direct address, which relates to invisible spectators by talking to them personally and confidentially. Building ratings depends upon presumed intimacy between the presenter and the audience. This often entails the audience amassing feelings for the presenter as a friend, a confidante or a trustworthy counsellor. However, unlike face-to-face (primary) relationships, the role of the presenter is formatted by managers to represent a specific public personality type. In other words, it is not an 'innocent' type of communication, but a type of exchange intended to mould public opinion.

Typical methods of interaction favoured by managers are to encourage presenters to engage in small talk and impromptu asides. Despite obviously having greater wealth and public influence than most of the spectators who watch them, presenters harp on the humdrum nature of their lives. The aim is to come over as a regular guy, just like you and me. These interactive methods contribute to the illusion of an unscripted, 'natural' exchange between equals and diverts the attention of the audience from the impersonality of the medium of interaction (the broadcast signal). By these means, affinity between the presenter and the viewer is engineered.

The public personality type of presenters is a facade that often bears nothing more than a loose connection with the private life of the 'real' person. However, because television permits para-social exchange in the home, and also because it allows interaction to carry a sense of evolution, it can result in unusually powerful emotional attachments between spectators and presenters. Spectators have no obligation or responsibility to presenters. They can withdraw at any moment. However, if they stay engaged they may become hooked. Isolated and lonely people are vulnerable to developing what Horton and Wohl refer to as 'extreme para-sociability' with certain presenters (Horton and Wohl, 1956: 45). That is fantasies of intimacy and solidarity that carry over into primary relationships. A slippage between the impersonal world of commercially organized television and ordinary day-to-day relationships occurs. As such, the authors provide an embryonic version of the fame attack thesis, since they plainly identify extreme para-sociability with entering a world of fantasy relations and delusions in which unhealthy neuroses and morbid obsessions may supplant primary relationships.

Typically, when people interact with someone playing a well-defined, formatted public role they experience discomfort. For example, when we engage with a judge, a policeman, a medical doctor or a social worker, we are conscious of

a degree of formality, rigidity and inequality. This may make us guarded in what we say and watchful of how the exchange occurs. It is probable that we will not offer confidences and apply a measure of discretion in what we disclose. This translates into a degree of emotional separation from the people occupying these roles. We may be polite and up to a point, forthcoming, but the spontaneity and trust that obtains in everyday conversations is often reserved.

With para-social relationships involving a celebrity, most of this does not apply. The relationship is based upon presumed intimacy. A sense of fraternity is deliberately mustered and applied. The presenter may be direct, confrontational and outspoken in ways that we would wish to be given half the chance. In this sense it is reasonable to propose that some celebrities allow us to play out our fantasies for public recognition and advocacy. The chat-show hosts David Letterman, Graham Norton, Jonathan Ross, Conan O'Brien and Oprah Winfrey are adept in portraying themselves as substitutes for the man and woman in the street. Just as celanthropy has produced Bono, Bob Geldof, Madonna, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Annie Lennox, Michael Stipe, Leonardo DiCaprio, Mia Farrow, Jay-Z, Naomi Watts and others, as stars with a heart, ready to devote part of their fame to the achievement of humanitarian relief. They have the assurance to put to the media what is on the minds of Everyman. In this, they can assume a degree of common ground with the public.

Public acclaim is seductive. For some celebrities who are inured to being the subjects of narcissistic idealization and hero worship it may produce a dangerous sense of invulnerable assurance and vigilante law. In 2009 Kayne West swept on stage at the MTV Music Video Awards as 19-year-old country singer Taylor Swift was accepting the award for Best Female Video and proclaimed that Beyoncé would have been a more deserving winner. The intrusion was widely condemned as rude and insensitive. West was forced to go on the Jay Leno show to issue a public apology. It is an example of a celebrity who believes himself above the rules, someone who has the confidence to believe that he speaks for the public despite being unequipped with a formal endorsement to do so.

A primary conduit of knowledge about common ground is focus group research sponsored by chat show producers into the concerns and opinions of the audience. Via the PR-Media hub and informal chat networks, the public is supplied with morsels of knowledge about the private lives of celebrities. On the other side, the PR-Media hub schools the celebrity to engage in formatted, closely manicured presentations that are designed to mould public opinion in predetermined ways. Chat-show and talk-show hosts appear to occupy the middle ground, between the star and the stargazer. In reality, the thrust of their questions is also mostly pre-determined with the input of specialized PR-Media personnel and they have been coached in mannerisms and television patois designed to produce presumed intimacy.

Today, star chat- and talk-show hosts like Larry King, David Letterman, Jonathan Ross, Oprah Winfrey, Conan O'Brien and Graham Norton may cultivate a regular guy persona. By identifying with the ordinary man and woman, and using unscripted, impromptu asides as people do in ordinary conversation, they stress their unity with the public. They are non-politicized 'big citizens' who on television and elsewhere strive to give the impression that they speak and behave as the ordinary citizen would if they had the means to occupy the public role.

Celebrity icons

This is a qualitatively different type of para-social relationship from that between a celebrity who presents the formatted role of a fame icon based upon presumed intimacy with the public. Celebrities like Britney Spears, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Paris Hilton, Jodie Marsh, Simon Cowell and Kanye West, are often portrayed in the media and perceived by the public as divas and prima donnas. Although they may engage in impromptu asides and occasionally cast themselves as regular guys, the locus of their fame resides in being more glamorous, wealthier, having more glitzy appeal, business opportunities and being free of normal social conventions.

These are the celebrities who present a public image of living a frontier existence in which emotional and psychological pressures are greater than for the ordinary person. As a result, the normal rules of everyday life do not apply. Theirs is the world of private airplanes, helipads, chauffeur-driven stretch limos, maids, personal chefs, bodyguards, tantrums, enormous performance fees and heedless consumption. The PR-Media hubs that work for them want the public to know it. For celebrity icons the nucleus of fame is a public image of exoticism. They are the rare and colourful birds of the jungle. They fly higher than other celebrities and the rest of us. So their demand for public attention knows no limits. They are stellar.

The term 'celebrity icon' has interlaced meanings. It refers to an exotic star, whose life may act as a cultural biography of the times. In addition, celebrity icons often attract and represent sectional, devotional interests and these are commonly rooted in generations. Thus, Pete Townshend, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Johnny Rotten, Boy George, Kurt Cobain, the late Michael Jackson, Lil Kim, Rihanna and Jay-Z are iconic figures for emergent youth subcultures who define themselves in opposition to dominant and residual cultures.³

It is an error to assume that cultural icons are confined to generations. They also represent separate social, political and religious sectional interests. Thus, Bob Marley remains an icon for postcolonial black rights; long before his untimely death, the singer Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan became an icon for Sufi devotional music (*Qawwali*), which is closely identified with Islam and Muslim rights, and 2Pac and

The Notorious B.I.G. symbolized the inequality and injustice in American society that was meted out to large sections of the Afro-American community.

Celebrity icons are like living artworks in that they are designed to vividly portray and often, through their dress and mannerisms, deliberately exaggerate, wider social, political and religious values of specific human groups. The exoticism of the celebrity icon is therefore not confined to the self-interest of the star. It represents sections of the public who regard themselves as being, in some sense, oppressed or thwarted and seek a resplendent figurehead. So celebrity icons are frequently linked with gay interests, animal rights, racial minorities, prisoners or religious sects.⁴ In representing one stratum of society, celebrity icons adopt forms of dress and public mannerisms that distance them from dominant and residual cultures. However, while their role as living artworks heightens the aesthetic dimension of their appearance, it is frequently connected to a broader domain of political, cultural or religious preferences. Through adornment and public appearances, celebrity icons use fame to speak for others who are too powerless and dispersed to have a coherent public voice in the media.

Lady Gaga: Gay icon

Lady Gaga, whom *Forbes* business magazine (May 2011) currently rates as the most powerful woman in the entertainment business, is an interesting case in point. She is notorious for her provocative music and outrageous fashion. The famous meat dress that she wore to the MTV Music Video Awards (2010) gained gigantic media attention. Yet celebrity commentators were quick to suggest meanings that go beyond the common reaction of personal attention-seeking behaviour.

Andrew Groves, course director of a degree in fashion design at the University of Westminster, maintained that the dress was an anti-fashion statement. At an historical moment when unauthorized downloading is undermining the music industry, he argued, the dress symbolized that the public interest in music stars today is not about music but about appearance. Because this fashion statement was made at a high-profile music awards ceremony, it was subversive. It used fashion as politics.

More conventionally, other commentators interpreted the dress as a feminist statement that female singers are treated by the industry, and regarded by large sections of the public, as pieces of meat, rather than artists. Other commentators regarded the dress as a comment on ageing, since meat is only fresh for so long. Thus, Richard Noble, an art academic based at Goldsmiths College, speculated that the dress was a reference to a meat sculpture by the Canadian artist Jana Sterbak (Winterman and Kelly, 2010).

Some of these interpretations seems somewhat laboured and, in the case of the comparison with Jana Sterbak, downright far-fetched. Lady Gaga is also a celebrated gay icon. A more tenable interpretation might pursue a more thorough examination of this connection. Hence, Lady Gaga wore the dress in the same month as she made a public speech in Portland, Maine and issued a *YouTube* video against gay discrimination in the US military. In the speech she stated that 'equality is the prime rib of America.' This is a pretty big clue which relates the dress directly to her attack on homophobia in the military and to enhance her status as a gay icon.

Celebrity icons are very often the public face of wider social movements. In the 1970s, the glam rock stars David Bowie and Marc Bolan were poster stars for the movement of bisexuality and gay liberation. Through their dress, use of cosmetics, spoken values and mannerisms, they challenged not merely heteronormative domination, but all types of established cultural rule. Elton John, who in the television documentary 'Tantrums and Tiaras' (1997) exemplified the larger than life, frontier existence of the celebrity icon, is also a famous spokesman and symbol for gay rights.

The dress and public attitude of Madonna in the 1980s performed a similar function. Madonna has a substantial gay following, but her larger fan base is the so-called 'new woman'. This generation defined itself partly in opposition to 1960s and 1970s feminism, by adopting cosmetics and fashion designed to signify sexual attraction and power. Rather than dressing down, they dressed up. Madonna represented this social movement and through her music and stage shows proselytized the image of the sexy, clever new woman who was aware of her sexuality, conscious of, and sympathetic to wider forms of injustice and intolerance and fully savvy with the necessary tricks of forcing the media to play to their tune.

There is no special need to add to the list. Celebrity icons occupy a pedestal in celebrity para-social relationships. They symbolize not merely glamour but sexual assertion, generational difference and the promulgation of much wider rules of social inclusion and exclusion. Madonna's hit single 'Papa Don't Preach' (1986) was not just a female affirmation of generational freedom and responsibility, it artfully counterposed the values of the new woman with the baggage of old, discredited models of female submissiveness and dowdiness.

Analogously, Lady Gaga's meat dress is more than a fashion statement to publicize gay rights, it is part of a structural landscape that is intended to absolutely distinguish one system of cultural values from others that are regarded as dominant and prejudicial. Celebrity icons act as dramatic shorthand for complex social divisions and fissile cultural distinctions.

Totemic celebrity

One might even say that cultural icons have a totemic significance in celebrity parasocial relationships. What is meant by this? In Sir James Frazer's classic account, *Totemism and Exogamy* (1909: 4–5), totems are not idols or fetishes. Rather, they are representational symbols portraying 'an imaginary brotherhood' that conveys meaning, ritual and unity to the group. Totems establish lines of demarcation that enable one group of people to separate themselves emotionally, politically, psychologically and culturally from other groups. Social inclusion and social exclusion follows demarcation lines and is automatically recognized by groups on both sides of the divide.

Anthropologists have regarded totemism as a characteristic of the earliest, most impressionable societies. Because life was so uncertain and mysterious in these societies, certain groups developed a propensity to seek meaning and solidarity in symbols of semi-fathomable superhuman forces (Levi Strauss, 1968).

We like to think that modern society has moved on from the world of the earliest peoples. However, semi-fathomable worship of incoherent, powerful forces is surely at the heart of celebrity worship syndrome and narcissistic idealization. These forces require the celebrity to be spatially and culturally remote, just as totems in the earliest societies were symbolically separated from the people. If, through emulation or physical propinquity, the people came too close to the totem, its power was held to be polluted.

Modern celebrities use conspicuous consumption, outlandish behaviour, outspoken views and outrageous fashion to signify distance and immunize themselves from pollution. Very few people would exactly want to dress like Lady Gaga. By dressing outrageously she minimizes opportunities for social encounters that are not on her terms. Would you really want to mingle with a woman wearing a meat dress? The more common response is to ogle. As a modern cultural totem, Lady Gaga and the meat dress establishes immediate lines of demarcation. You instantly know which side you are on. The exoticism of the fashion translates into being above the mundane considerations of ordinary life. Lady Gaga does not live with Zeus. But her dress and mannerisms powerfully articulate complex social and cultural distinctions that place her as an inhabitant of a latter-day Mount Olympus, categorically separate from life in the lower territories.

Totems are striking, notable representations. For this reason they are likely to figure prominently on the radar of the media, and generate opinion and discussion. Whatever else one might say about Lady Gaga's flamboyance, it certainly, currently receives intense media coverage. This raises her personal profile and, as such, it may be interpreted sarcastically as a cynical method of self-promotion. Conversely,

her public profile enables her platform statement criticizing discrimination against gays in the US military to be widely reported. So her status as a totem for gay rights has a demonstrable publicity dividend. It classically executes Bernays's advice to leaders to use drama and incident to generate leverage with the media (Bernays, 1928, 1935).

Syndicated fraternization

The relationship between celebrity icons, celebrity totems or what have you, and an 'imaginary brotherhood' is based in the idea of fraternization. In the digital age the fraternization at issue here is very different from ordinary face-to-face encounters (Castells, 2009). Crucially, it is mediated through a system of communication (a television screen, a computer interface, a mobile phone), it does not require focused attention and it is sponsored by a commercial or public service broadcasting organization. I can watch Oprah Winfrey live, but I can detach myself from the flow of conversation and ignore large sections of the transmission. If I did this in an ordinary face-to-face encounter, it would produce conflict. So celebrities use various strategies and techniques to create the protocol of fraternization with the audience in order to stimulate relations of closeness and intimacy. The aim is to build amity and solidarity through the personal touch. By virtue of their appearance, mannerisms and public statements, the celebrity expresses brotherhood with structurally specific emotional preferences, cultural values and lifestyle predicaments. This may take the form of knowing asides, tactful observations, jokes or political statements that the celebrity uses to establish rapport with the viewers. Building and sustaining confidence is a prerequisite of fraternization.

The celebrity icon is not the achievement of direct, co-present, collective organization and collective action. True, there is a sense in which a live TV broadcast is a collective, co-operative enterprise. The TV presenter addresses the studio audience. Questions and comments from the floor are part of *Oprah*, *Jerry Springer* and other popular TV talk shows. However, the audience at home is not strictly speaking co-present since they are at liberty to ignore most or all of the conventions that apply to ordinary face-to-face conversations. Celebrities and the studio audience do not directly monitor the audience at home (although the views and other responses of the latter may eventually be gleaned by focus groups, telephone surveys and the like). Likewise, the audience at home is under no obligation to engage with the studio exchange. Yet of course, the awareness of the celebrity host and the studio audience that they are participating in a live event, and that there is an invisible audience at home, influences the forms of talk, mannerisms and style of live exchange (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994: 55).

Of course, sponsorship influences the structure of communication. Public service and commercial broadcasting syndicate different cultures of fraternization. The former encourages affinity around values of education, impartiality, probity and artistic merit. These values are also cultivated by commercial broadcasting, but the latter operates in a context in which ratings wars and advertising revenue exert greater influence on programme-making and scheduling.

Fraternization requires the PR-Media hub to provide consumers of celebrity culture with prep-talk. The term prep-talk refers to personal information, planted gossip, potted histories and psychological insights that relate to the celebrity. This may be achieved through a variety of means, of which trailers, magazine interviews, gossip columns and entertainment pages, are central. Prep talk prepares consumers to interact with celebrities as known quantities. Fraternization emerges around personal data which seems to be shared but is mostly strategically placed by the PR-Media hub. We know that Oprah is today one of the richest and most influential talk-show hosts in the world. She is so famous that she is immediately recognizable by her Christian name alone. This is a distinction achieved by only a handful of celebrities. But most of us also know that hers is a rags to riches story. Born illegitimate in poverty in Mississippi, her ascent is often taken as a textbook example of the American dream. The release of personal data is rationed and accented by the PR-Media hub in order to achieve social impact. Despite the immense differences in wealth between her and the general public, we see ourselves on the same team as Oprah because we know that she was born on the wrong side of the tracks and made it by willpower, talent and hard work. Fraternization then is syndicated around a celebrity brand with a view to promoting celebrity affinity and idealization among the public.

The word 'syndicate' is used to emphasize the controlled, goal-driven nature of the communication. The PR-Media hub aims to build the celebrity brand as an icon or artefact that achieves general public recognition and scores a high impact rating with the public. The release of private data, particularly celebrity 'secrets', is essential to this process. It creates the preconditions for presumed intimacy with the audience.

It can be easily appreciated why this relationship is often conceived in terms of inequality and manipulation. Stars have great cultural power. This power may certainly be used to manipulate public opinion in ways that enhance the economic and cultural power of the star and the commercial interests that the star represents rather than the common good. But there is nothing intrinsic in the communication process that is predisposed to manipulation. The physical and social distance between the star and the stargazer is now so immense that strong brands are required to organize emotional identification and commercially meaningful

fraternization with audiences. The trick for the PR-Media hub is to develop iconic messages and dramatic symbols that are communicated in the blink of the eye. The more that the ratio of contact is predisposed to instant identification rather than thought, the greater will be the initial investment of advertising and public relations. If this is achieved, physical and social distance is suspended, and a sense of fraternity with the celebrity icon ensues. The aim is not to hoodwink the audience, but to create a mainline route to their attention.

Fraternization is the key because it denotes the impression of friendship, shared understanding, common ground and other features of reciprocity between the celebrity icon and the audience. In this way, the audience is encouraged to 'know' the celebrity without ever physically meeting them. Bernays wrote: 'Today's leaders have become more remote physically from the public; yet, at the same time, the public has much greater familiarity with these leaders through the system of modern communications' (Bernays, 1947: 114).

In the United States and Britain this has long been apparent in electoral politics. Presidential and prime ministerial candidates with a strong message, and a clear, uncomplicated image, get elected and re-elected. Think of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair. Candidates with a complex message and a fuzzy image fall by the wayside. Who now remembers Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, John Kerry, Iain Duncan Smith or Michael Howard?

The personal element provided by celebrities and the PR-Media hub is the key to the 'imaginary brotherhood' of syndicated fraternization. But the promotion of, and reaction to, this personal element is different in kind to everyday encounters. The imaginary brotherhood is based on remote physical and social relationships and is organized around facades that limit opportunities for spontaneity.

For example, Lady Gaga is an image. More than this, she is an image formatted by the cultural intermediaries that she works with to produce a facade to produce a calculated range of impact factors with the public. Her concerts are advertised as genuinely live on stage without miming – a point that she often highlights by breathing heavily into the on-stage mic when she finishes her numbers. In relating to the facade, we do not refer to the real person. For how can we know who the real person (Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta) is behind the Lady Gaga persona? Lady Gaga obviously performs in public and attends public events. Unauthorized data about Lady Gaga that might run counter to the facade, may be produced and exchanged through blog sites, chat-room sites and other mechanisms. Unquestionably, there is an interplay between the airbrushed, manicured image of a cultural icon and unregulated communication. In certain conditions data and opinions from unauthorized sources can provide a counter-image with sufficient strength and momentum to dent or transform the iconic facade. It is not a

zero-sum game between authorized and unauthorized sources, but it is an unequal one. Exposure to the brand is continuous, ubiquitous and high profile, whereas unauthorized exchange networks typically operate on a disorganized, dispersed and episodic basis. It is the brand that hogs the limelight and, if properly managed, seizes public opinion.

If it is right to propose that the brand is contrived and the celebrity icon is an artifact that has no necessary relationship with reality, our relationship is not really with a person but with a thing. This may lead to intense levels of emotional connection between the audience and the celebrity, but it also carries limitations. Strong brands breed tunnel vision. Once a celebrity icon is established, the expectations of the audience are quite set. Variations of radical transformations of the facade of the celebrity icon are risky. Once you expect Lady Gaga to be the meat-dress lady, you feel short-changed or cheated when she dresses down.

The thing-like facade is intended to produce programmed responses, but this often carries over into a condition of estrangement in which the celebrity feels at growing odds with the public persona.

If the celebrity icon is a facade that is powder-puffed and blushed-up to achieve commercially meaningful syndicated fraternization, it may become an iron mask that the celebrity is forced to wear in order to gain acclaim. The public face of the star, which may be defined as the facade constructed by the PR-Media hub, is often privately experienced by the star as a prosthetic device that ceases to have a positive value after social impact is launched and achieved. Privately, the star may come to feel engulfed and suffocated by the public face of the celebrity icon. This often produces the urge in some celebrities to subvert the para-social relationship with the audience.

The list of stars who have attempted to step out of the mirror of para-social illusions is a long one. One thinks of John Lennon and his attempt to demythologize the public face of *The Beatles* (Wenner, 1981); Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994, which, according to his suicide note, was prompted by a strong sense of being trapped by a phony show biz image; Britney Spears's decision in 2007 to shave her hair, which was widely interpreted as an impulsive, emotional bid to shed her glitzy Hollywood image; and, of course, the list of child stars who had well-documented, agonizing problems in struggling with their adolescent public celebrity face as they grew older, which I discussed in Chapter 2.

Para-social relationships, then, enable recognition and reciprocity. However, because they are based in the representation of a facade (a thing), not a person, they are not quite the same as connections and conversations that we have in ordinary life.

Ordinary conversations: The value of access, utility and labour

Of course, it would be wrong to infer that the conversations in ordinary life are not formatted. Effective social life depends upon scripted roles. But in everyday relationships the scripts are not ordinarily well defined. Even among primary relationships, exchanges carry latitude for spontaneity and departure from scripts. There is much less latitude in conversations between a star and a stargazer because each has expectations of the other based on structural inequality.

If we think of social connections and conversations in structural terms they consist of three elements: access, utility and labour. The combination of these elements determines the value of the relationship.

Access refers to the ease and flexibility of contact. Continuous, engaged, relaxed feedback in multiple settings is the cornerstone of getting to know someone. This implies recognition of co-presence and respect for personal space. Usually it entails the acknowledgement of vulnerability since this builds trust in the relationship. If I have a fear of swimming and you acknowledge it, a toehold of emotional rapport is likely to follow. If you scoff at my fear, I may take this as a callous or out-of-tune response and become emotionally withdrawn. Acknowledging mutual vulnerability is one of the ways in which we build trust with one another, just as exploiting vulnerability is one of the most serious ways of overstepping the mark and breaching trust.

The prototype of ordinary access is the conversation in which we focus on interaction with another person and have a sense of mutual development.

If we interact with someone who seems emotionally wooden, narrowly intent on the business at hand, irrespective of other relevant considerations, such as our feelings or point of view, we withdraw. Access may be relatively open in terms of time, but the scripted character of the exchange is experienced as off-putting. In everyday life, emotional commitments usually develop from unscripted exchanges in which we have the impression of getting to know the real person.

Access may, of course, produce the opposite effect. Even when we feel that we have gotten to know the real person, it may be that extended, focused interaction creates resistance, opposition and terminates in rift. However, limited access prejudices the evolution of the relationship and typically induces emotional withdrawal. This applies to the rationing of encounters. There may be some truth in the adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder. It is certainly true that relationships can persist and even develop (through Internet, phone and letters) without face-to-face contact. However, ordinarily prolonged rationing culminates in emotional disinvestment. Achieving access is one reason why people live together. It is a precondition of primary relationships

and extends to relationships between parents and children, siblings, kinship networks and friendships.

Utility refers to the uses that we amass and apply from the relationship. If someone makes us feel good about ourselves and we develop the reciprocal sense of being good for them, we form close ties that enhance our mutual attraction and emotional security. Utility is a key resource in self-promotion and impression management.

If a relationship establishes a sense of positive use, it is life enhancing. The greatest utility of all is the state of love, in which the relationship 'naturally' fulfils our intellectual, spiritual, emotional and erotic needs. When we are in love we are conscious of an equilibrium that extends beyond the confines of personal psychology into our social relationships. Everything seems to flow.

Utility is perfectly compatible with extreme pragmatism. We may need someone to care for us, or listen to our troubles or enhance our personal status, but this can lead to one-sided, negative loops of behaviour. Gaining satisfaction from someone may be achieved by exploitation and abuse. We may seek to play a zero-sum game in which we take but never give (or vice versa). In some relationships, utility works like this. So it is right to say that utility is not always a matter of positive experience. Indeed, the seat of utility is emotional need and this may be expressed in irrational, harmful types of conduct.

Labour refers to the quantity and quality of physical, mental and emotional energy expended in a relationship. To achieve access and utility requires work. Not only do we make ourselves available for focused encounters, we monitor the quality of the exchanges. Emotional labour involves developing and applying the relationship and people skills that bring the best out of people and help us achieve our goals. Labour is a means of accessing utility. The more effort we put into doing something, the more chance we have to learn and assimilate transferable skills.

There is a lot of misunderstanding about emotional labour. It is often applied to putting people at their ease and making them feel good about themselves. But it is not intrinsically about caring for others. Emotional labour may be mostly driven by narcissism, dedicated to getting one's own way and enhancing self-esteem. It may be a life strategy that goes with narcissistic idealization and hero worship.

If labour makes us closer to another, it also exposes us and increases our obligation to create time and space and produce systems of monitoring that protect and enhance the relationship. The strength of the relationship is directly related to judgements about the competence of the labour used to sustain it. If we feel that the person talking to us does not really understand where we are coming from or misreads our intentions, we become emotionally ruffled and may disinvest and eventually disengage. Ordinarily, making relationships work is not just a matter of labour, it is a question of the recognition of labour. If this recognition is absent in

face-to-face encounters it requires other forms of reward, such as gifts, treats or public statements.

Para-social conversations

Celebrities obviously respect issues of access, utility and labour in para-social conversations. Talk and chat show hosts go to some lengths to express their availability and solidarity with the studio audience during airtime. By presenting themselves as the unelected spokesman of the audience, a clear message of affinity with the group is established. In addition, the use of apparently impromptu asides, off-the-cuff jokes and tactful remarks is designed to make the studio audience and the audience at home feel that they are in the know and are trusted inquisitors.

Celebrities who give unscripted live performances and press events engage in similar types of behaviour to emphasize access and solidarity. For a time, Peter Gabriel, Iggy Pop and Bono made hand walking or diving into the audience a feature of live performance. They attempted to break down the barrier between stars and stargazers by making an issue of their vulnerability and dependence. When a star literally places him- or herself in the hands of a concert audience, there is no one else to catch him if he falls. Similarly, when film stars attend the Oscar ceremonies or a film premiere they often make a point of dramatically leaving the red carpet and reaching out to the crowd, signing autographs and shaking hands.

In these encounters access, utility and labour are present, but subject to the laws of structural distance that are at the heart of para-social relationships. Rock stars who mix with the audience during live performances always go back on stage having served notice of their availability, empathy, affinity and solidarity. Similarly, film stars who shake hands with the crowd and sign autographs at high-status metropolitan film premieres always tread back onto the red carpet. These encounters humanize the celebrity. For a brief interlude they appear to be just like us. They are willing to joke with us, pass the time of day, touch us and share a moment in our company. Then they resume the dizzy, cultural remoteness that makes us recognize them as true stars.

But there is something peculiar about access, utility and labour in para-social encounters. Unlike ordinary conversations, the recorded nature of celebrity makes access ubiquitous, utility infinite and labour inexhaustible. The labour theory of value proposes that workers are employed by employers to create value by adding utility to the resources of Nature and Society. Thus, in being employed as a professor my labour power is employed to add value to students by using my training, knowledge and experience to enhance their talents and expand their powers of comprehension. My employer employs me because so long as my classes are big enough and my

research is published and recognized, I generate a surplus. That is for the university, the numbers enrolled in my classes generate a margin of profit, and my publications add to the cultural capital of the institution (allowing them to raise fees and increase margins if they are so minded). My work is partly recorded, in that my thoughts are contained in books. I receive a royalty for each book that I publish. In that sense, I am a recorded person. You can have a para-social relationship with me despite never having met me, and this relationship has the capacity to continue even after my death because part of my existence is now print based.

This is indeed a para-social relationship, but it is small beer compared with the para-social relationships that revolve around stars. MC Lyte and Matt Damon are recorded people. The data that is encoded in their records, videos and films is more complex than the words committed by me to the printed page. It is like the DNA of a genome.

A book written by me gives a limited data set of who I am. A DVD or film file of *Good Will Hunting* (1997), *The Bourne Identity* (2002) or *The Departed* (2006) is a much broader data set because it conveys information about embodiment, voice, thought and emotion. That this data is an expression of acting adds a new layer of complexity to questions of access, utility and labour. The issue then becomes: who is the real Matt Damon compared with the characters inhabited and played by the actor on film?

The labour theory of value treats access, labour and utility as bound by time and space. Thus, the value that I add as a professor reflects the time I spend in student contact and writing books and articles. The value produced by recorded celebrity is quite different. For there is no time or space limit on the exchange or reuse of Matt Damon DVDs or film files. As cultural commodities they can be perpetually re-engineered, to add values that were never envisaged by the actor or the producers that employed him.

It might be objected that cultural commodities have always had these qualities. A painting by Titian or a tune by Gilbert and Sullivan is subject to constant reinterpretation. Plagiarism and parody have always been the name of the game with cultural items. But what is new is that digital technologies permit rather more than copying or parodying a film or a song. They allow the complete overhaul and rearrangement of coded material.

This requires us to rethink not only what a para-social conversation means, but also the conventional premise of exploitation contained in the labour theory of value. To take the second issue first, the labour theory of value argues that the creation of additional value produced by the labour power of the worker is appropriated by the employer. The difference between the cost of labour power (wages) and the added value produced by labour power (surplus) is appropriated by the employer in the form of profit.

It might be said that this theory of value still applies to the production of cultural commodities. When MC Lyte releases a rap song or Matt Damon is employed to star in a film the employer assumes that the worker will add value that will eventually be accumulated as profit. But in the era of instant, weightless consumption there are several caveats that need to be added to this assumption.

To begin with, unauthorized downloading drives down profits. So employers can no longer assume that their investment in MC Lyte or Matt Damon will produce an acceptable return. More profoundly, from the point of view of our considerations here, the labour of MC Lyte or Matt Damon is now subject to the law of inexorable exploitation. But the exploiter is now the consumer, not the producer. With low-cost digital technology, the consumer can appropriate copyrighted recordings for free and re-engineer music and film files to engage in perpetual rearrangement. Old cultural theories based around the labour theory of value portrayed consumers as passive and culturally illiterate (Adorno, 1991). Today, the digital revolution combined with the increased cultural literacy of the consumer produced by higher numbers of the population going to university, require us to revise these old assumptions. It might be said that it was always a gross exaggeration to portray consumers as passive and culturally illiterate. But leaving that aside, what is quite certain is that in the field of culture it is now more accurate to speak of the active, literate consumer.

Looking at this matter from a different angle, the balance of power between the celebrity and the consumer has shifted. Obviously, star power still exists. But while we have been aware for some time that the recorded nature of star power influences patterns of consumption, it is only now that we are beginning to fully appreciate the consequences. It is not just a matter of access becoming ubiquitous, utility becoming infinite, and labour transforming into an inexhaustible resource, all of which greatly empowers the consumer, it is also a matter of the radical expansion of the cultural capital of celebrity to provide what might be called life-coaching. Ubiquitous celebrities do not merely sell music, film, television or the fashion of the catwalk; they provide free advice about grooming, impression management, self-promotion and even 'correct' social, political, cultural and environmental values. That this advice is unsolicited by the audience is neither here nor there. It is a feature of the facade of celebrity, which is layered onto the emotional connection, that is the heart of para-social conversations. Crucially, it carries over into ordinary life as a resource that equips individuals to present themselves as more relevant, competent and capable. Thus, star power provides cultural capital of lifestyle-coaching that is directly transferable to everyday life. Para-social relationships are important in culture, not merely as vehicles for narcissistic idealization and hero worship, but they are also used practically to enhance the presentation of personality, refine lifestyle skills and expand social appeal.

For Horton and Wohl (1956) para-social relationships are theorized as regimented, since the perception is that such encounters are usually organized around programmed live appearances or broadcasts. This radically curtails spontaneity. Unscripted access, which is often the key to getting closer to someone in everyday life because it requires us to be more inventive about conversational labour, is at a premium with stars. In addition, the contours of interaction are governed by the formatted facade of the celebrity. Since the facade is formatted, it follows that exchanges are limited to finite tramlines of communication. Fans are made to feel uncomfortable if they overstep the mark and intrude on the carefully protected privacy of the star.

The connotation of formatting is less powerful in societies organized around multimodal systems of mass communication. Para-social relationships are integral to television, film, mobile phone messaging, popular music and the Internet. Flexible accumulation is now the order of the day. Celebrities set out their stall, but consumers have far more power in selecting image accumulation. This is not to deny the fantasy relationship that is the axis of the celebrity-fan relationship.

For celebrities, the utility of the audience resides primarily in the acclaim that they mete out to the star. This is the cultural capital of the celebrity, which translates directly into financial reward and cultural influence. For fans, the utility of the celebrity lies in fantasy relationships with the star and social network engagement with other stargazers. Although the celebrity facade is an artefact constructed by the PR-Media hub, it can be appropriated by the audience as the basis for developing highly personal, aesthetic, intellectual and spiritual relationships. The imaginary quality of para-social relationships with celebrities is a common source of emotional support and coaching resources for stargazers. However, as we have already noted, Horton and Wohl (1956) recognized that in the case of isolated, vulnerable individuals caught-up in para-social encounters, the character of the relationship may become extreme, resulting in what we now call the symptoms of fame attack.

Para-social conversations are unusual in that they are simultaneously centred in the facade of the celebrity and also decentred in the inches devoted to them in gossip columns, entertainment news sections, chat rooms, websites and blog sites. Because representations of celebrity now occur on multiple fronts, regulating the unity of the celebrity facade through exposure management is a greater challenge for the PR-Media hub. The personal touch, which is the foundation of syndicated fraternization, is subject to mistiming and misreading. An intended personal remark designed to exchange utility with the public may be read in ways that suggest schisms or frictions in the public facade of the star. Rearguard actions by the celebrity to apply access and labour to correct public misreadings often have the effect of compounding the problem. Mistiming in para-social relationships can get

the star into hot water. Kanye West acted like a highwayman in seizing the spotlight from Taylor Swift at the 2009 MTV Video Awards; and Mel Gibson's anti-Semitic tirade in 2006 and his menacing leaked phone calls to Oksana Grigorieva (2010) have tainted his celebrity facade with images of racism, sexism and domestic violence. In both cases, the stars conveyed an air of entitlement and invulnerability that is typical of some forms of narcissistic behaviour. West's public recantation of the act took the form of a straightforward TV apology.

Gibson's recantation is more complex. His denial that he is a racist or an abuser is wrapped up in a convoluted defence of frontierism. The pressures of stardom mean that stars like Gibson are forced to live on the edge, and therefore the restraints on verbally abusive behaviour that are second nature to ordinary people are less well-developed. In Gibson's case, this defence is intertwined with references to a history of needing professional treatment to deal with problems of alcohol abuse.

The psychology of invulnerability is interesting. Certainly, it goes with being accustomed to public acclaim, financial rewards and all of the confidence in expressing emotional labour that follows. But it also smacks of the tendency of self-destruction. Celebrities are not omnipotent, despite living in a culture that presents them as supremely talented and glamorous creatures. Mistimings suggest a devil-may-care attitude to public opinion. They are certainly seized upon as such by the media who clearly relish celebrity 'gaffes' and 'meltdowns'. The Greek playwright Euripides wrote, 'Those whom the gods wish to destroy they first make mad.' Para-social conversations are just as dangerous to some isolated and vulnerable stars as they are to isolated, vulnerable ordinary people. For they make the star look into the mirror of public adoration and media applause and see the reflection of an untouchable being. But this reflection is a mirage. Stars who are consistently heedless of public opinion or engage in recorded narcissistic outbursts walk on the edge of a cauldron. They are like Icarus, blind to the truth that his wax wings will burn if he flies too close to the sun. People who regard themselves to be untouchable write an open cheque for self-destruction.