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The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America

JOSHUA GAMSON

☐—*This paper traces the history of two intertwining stories in American celebrity texts and their relationship to the development and organization of publicity apparatuses. In one storyline, dominant in the first part of the century, the deserving rise naturally to the top. In the other storyline, stronger in later decades, celebrities are artificially manufactured. As institutional control weakened and publicity mechanisms grew more sophisticated, image-manufacture and celebrity-production became more visible in texts. In each period a balance was struck between the competing explanations of fame through the entry of new narrative elements, most notably through an increase in the power attributed to audiences.*

66 ┃T is, we are sure," wrote the editor of the movie fan magazine *Silver Screen* in
     the 1930s, "impossible to be great part of the time and revert to commonplace-
ness the rest of the time. Greatness is built in" ("Final Fling," 1970, p. 39). In the
late 1960s, a *TV Guide* writer (Efron, 1967) took issue with this claim, describing a
"peculiar machine" in American culture. "It was conceived by public-relations
men," she wrote, "and it is a cross between a vacuum cleaner and a sausage maker.
It sucks people in—it processes them uniformly—it ships them briskly along a
mechanical assembly line—and it pops them out at the other end, stuffed tight into
a shiny casing stamped 'U.S. Celebrity' " (p. 16). Decades later, Andy Warhol's
claim that "in the future everyone will be world famous for fifteen minutes" has
become the most famous statement on fame. "Well, Andy, the future is now," wrote
the editors of "How Fleet It Is," a 1988 *People Weekly* report. "Fame's spotlight darts
here and there, plucking unknowns from the crowd, then plunging them back into
obscurity" (p. 88). How did this central American discourse migrate from fame as
the natural result of irrepressible greatness to celebrity as the fleeting product of a
vacuum cleaner/sausage maker?

This is the story of two stories. In one, the great and talented and virtuous and
best-at rise to the top of the attended-to, aided perhaps by rowdy promotion, which
gets people to notice but can do nothing to actually make the unworthy famous.
Fame—from the Latin for "manifest deeds"—is in this story related to achieve-
ment or quality. In the other story, the publicity apparatus itself becomes a central

plot element, even a central character; the publicity machine focuses attention on the worthy and unworthy alike, churning out many admired commodities called celebrities, famous because they have been made to be. Contrary to ahistorical popular mythology, these two stories have actually coexisted for more than a century, usually in odd but harmonious combinations. Over the course of this century, however, the balance between them has shifted. In this paper, I trace and attempt to make sense of changes in the popular discourse of celebrity—in particular, the implicit and explicit explanations in popular magazines of why and how people become famous.[1] I argue in closing that these stories, built on a long-standing tension between aristocratic and democratic models of fame, raise important questions about public visibility in democratic, consumer-capitalist society.

This is not simply the story of texts, however. Tracing the discourse on celebrity involves tracing as well the history of the mechanisms available and used for garnering attention. A system for celebrity-creation, at times much less systematic than at others, has been in place firmly since the birth of mass commercial culture. Changes both in the concrete organization of publicity and in the technology and media through which recognition is disseminated have had a profound impact on the operation of celebrity in this century.

As technology and publicity apparatuses grew, they became more and more publicly visible, integrated into discussions of celebrity. This visibility increasingly posed a threat, I will argue, to the reigning myth that fame was a natural cream-rising-to-the-top phenomenon. In the first half of the century this threat was largely controlled. It was not entirely muted, however, and a number of changes in the discourse developed, seemingly defusing the challenge. Audiences began to be invited inside the "real lives" of celebrities. Texts affirmed meritocratic fame by "training" audiences in discerning the reality behind an image and by suggesting that publicity apparatuses were in the audience's control. Beginning around 1950, changes in the celebrity-building environment—the breakdown of studio control, the rise of television, a boom in the "supply" of celebrities—significantly destabilized what had been a tightly integrated celebrity system. The publicity enterprise then began a move toward center stage in the celebrity discourse, with manufacture becoming a serious competitor to the organic explanation of fame. A new coping strategy began to show itself in texts: audiences were now invited not only behind the image, but behind the scenes to image *production*. The relationship between image and reality gradually became less a problem than a source of engagement. Previously flattered as the controllers of the direction of publicity spotlights, audiences were now flattered as cynical insiders to the publicity game.

EARLY FAME: GROWTH OF A FAULT LINE

As Braudy (1986) amply demonstrates in his history of fame, *The Frenzy of Renown*, the ambition to stand out from the crowd is not at all new in Western culture. One dynamic in particular is relevant here: the long-standing and intertwined strains of aristocratic and democratic fame. At its very early stages, fame-seeking was limited to those with "the power to control their audiences and their images" (p. 28)—that is, to political and religious elites. The early discourses firmly established fame—

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whether the Roman "fame through public action" (p. 117), the Christian "fame of the spirit" (p. 121), or the literary "fame of the wise" (p. 152)—as the province of the top layer of a natural hierarchy.

Yet with the development of technologies and arts to which many more had access (printing, portraiture, engraving, all widespread by the late sixteenth century), public prominence was gradually detached from an aristocratic social status. "Faces," Braudy (1986) writes, "were appearing everywhere" (p. 267). Both the producers of and audiences for images broadened dramatically, opening "a whole new market in faces and reputations" (p. 305). Discourse began to recognize this as well, suggesting that fame is not the "validation of a class distinction" (p. 371) but the personal possession of any worthy individual. In its democratized version, particularly strong in early America, the discourse is characterized by what Braudy calls "paradoxical uniqueness" (p. 371), a sort of compromise between an elitist meritocracy of the personally distinguished and an egalitarian democracy in which all are deserving. "Praise me because I am unique," went the logic, "but praise me as well because my uniqueness is only a more intense and public version of your own" (p. 372). The "great man" was generally one of distinctive inner qualities, but qualities that could potentially exist in any man. (Women, almost entirely excluded from public life, were also generally excluded from this early mythology of public greatness.)

What is important in this vastly boiled-down history is the existence of a fault line, a pull between aristocracy (in modern form, usually meritocracy) and democracy, that is *built into* modern discourses on fame. The two stories we will be examining are constructed on this fault.

THE SUCKER AS EXPERT: BARNUM AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY CELEBRITY

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a series of dramatic changes in the media of publicity and communication established celebrity as a "mass" phenomenon. Newspapers began to spread with the invention of the steam-powered cylinder press in the early 1800s. By mid-century, new technologies—the telegraph in particular—allowed information to move without necessarily being constrained by space. The idea of "context–free information" began to solidify, such that the value of information was no longer necessarily "tied to any function it might serve in social and political decision-making and action, but may attach itself merely to its novelty, interest, and curiosity" (Postman, 1985, p. 65). Information was now transportable through space and, thus freed, could be bought or sold. With the arrival of the rotary press in the mid-1840s, the subsequent growth of widely available "penny press" papers, the founding of the news wire services, and the professionalization of reporting (Schudson, 1978), encounters with the names and activities of unknown people became a daily experience—and a business. In the meantime, photography was taking a strong hold in the latter half of the century, with the halftone print perfected by the 1880s. Photography, of course, meant encountering not only a name and a description of a stranger, but a realistic image. Imaging was now at nearly everyone's disposal.[2]

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P. T. Barnum. Publicity stunts were standard early journalistic fare, and often revealed (Fuhrman, 1989, p. 14); but with Barnum and his claim to cater to the "sucker born every minute," the showman-publicist and the publicity system became active parts of the discourse on fame. Barnum was, first of all, an innovator in the activity of press agentry. His subjects were superlatives—the best, the strangest, the biggest, the only—made superlative through image management. Throughout, "by turning every possible circumstance to [his] account," his main instrument was the press, to which he was "so much indebted for [his] success" (Barnum, 1981 [1869], p. 103).

Barnum was not simply publicly promoting the performers, however; he was publicly performing the promotion. He himself became an international figure for the *way* he focused attention, the way he created fame, and the way he created illusion. "First he humbugs them," a ticket-seller once observed (Toll, 1976) "and then they pay to hear him tell how he did it" (p. 26). His multivolume autobiography was one of the most widely read books of the latter nineteenth century (Bode, 1981, p. 23). There, as in many of his shows, he revealed the tricks of attention-gathering and image-creation, behind-the-scenes with the humbug. As Braudy (1986) points out, the activity involved playing with reality more than definitively marking it off. Barnum's was an active audience, "willing to be manipulated but eager to convey how that ought to be done more expertly" (p. 381). Shuttling his audiences between knowing the tricks and believing the illusions, Barnum brought publicity mechanisms and questions of artifice to the forefront.

FILM AND THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY STAR SYSTEM

Barnum, however, was extraordinary. Although they were common activities, attention-getting and image-management were still relatively unsystematic until the growth of professional public relations and film technology in the early twentieth century. As industrial power grew in the first quarter of the century, so did conscious policies of managing public attitudes in order to retain that power. Corporations "began to *recognize* a public for the first time" (Schudson, 1978, p. 133; see also Carey, 1987). Ivy Lee relentlessly promoted "the art of getting believed in" (Olasky, 1987, p. 49). By the 1920s, led by Edward Bernays (1952), the profession of "counsel on public relations" was well established.

The new publicity professional represented a departure from showman press agentry. The "art" was not simply getting attention (any publicity is good), but "getting believed in" (only publicity that promotes the desired image is good). The public relations counsel, Bernays argued, "is not merely the purveyor of news, he is more logically the *creator* of news" (quoted in Schudson, 1978, p. 138). The growth of public relations thus involved radical changes in the ideology and practice of news as well. "What had been the primary basis for competition among journalists—the exclusive, the inside story, the tip, the scoop," writes Schudson (1978), "was whisked away by press releases and press conferences" (p. 140). Image management, which had earlier been haphazard, was now a profession, and newspapers, which "had once fought 'the interests,' now depended on them for handouts" (p. 140).

This period also marked the birth of modern American consumer culture (see Fox & Lears, 1983) and, with newly expanded markets (urban, female), a boom in the

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business of leisure. As celebrity became systematized in early twentieth century America, the leisure-time business of "show" was its primary arena: famous people as entertainment and entertainers as famous people. This new system grew up, of course, around the new technologies of film. In 1894, the world's first Kinetoscope parlor opened in New York City. Within a few years, short moving films had been integrated into the preeminent popular entertainment of the time, vaudeville, then moved rapidly into widespread "nickelodeon" exhibition, which dominated until around 1912 (Balio, 1985, part I). The possibilities for mass, industrial production of film entertainment quickly became clear.

Using featured players to attract audiences had been the custom in stage theater, touring companies, burlesque, and vaudeville but had not made the transition to early film.[3] The first steps toward the breakdown of film anonymity came from economic necessity and the new requirements of the developing mass production system. Early on, the Motion Picture Patents Company essentially controlled the industry, and independent producers were searching for means to challenge the monopoly. By the early teens, competition from independents had pushed important innovations, among them the replacement of single-reel with feature-length programs. The feature film, with higher production costs, required "a special and individualized promotional effort" and a new marketing and distribution system not met by nickelodeons (Balio, 1985, p. 111). Studios began to draw on established actors from the stage to promote these new, more expensive films.[4] The first movie fan magazine, *Photoplay*, was founded in 1910, followed quickly by others.

Despite challenges from independent producers, power was in the hands of studios, which were firmly committed to a mass production system. Movie manufacturers adapted the star system to the industry's needs. After unsuccessfully trying to distinguish their products through trademarks and storylines, Klaprat (1985) argues, producers shifted strategies with the discovery that audiences distinguished films by stars (pp. 351–354).

The advantages of the star system had become abundantly clear to film manufacturers, and the studios moved quickly to institutionalize it.[5] By the 1920s, film performers were essentially studio owned-and-operated commodities. The system was extensive and very tightly controlled—successfully so because of the high integration of the industry (see Balio, 1985; Powdermaker, 1950)—encompassing production, distribution, and exhibition of films. Through testing and molding, studios designed star personalities; through vehicles, publicity, promotion, public appearances, gossip, fan clubs, and photography, they built and disseminated the personalities; through press agents, publicity departments, and contracts, they controlled the images.

Controlling a contracted actor, of course, did no good unless he or she could become a semi-guaranteed draw. The strategies developed during this time for manufacturing and using celebrity remained essentially intact until the early 1950s. Some celebrity-building was conducted through simple fabrication. For example, with no established on-screen reputation, Theda Bara was given a name and an exotic background to establish her off screen, making her a film star before she had made a film (Walker, 1970, pp. 51–52). For the most part, though, celebrity was built systematically and deliberately through publicity and grooming that merged on- and off-screen personae.

Like the new public relations professionals, the studios turned not only on manipulating attention but on manipulating belief. Critical to the early building of stars was the building of an image that did not *appear* to emanate from the studio. Thus, after test-marketing the image; promoting the personality through advertising, stunts, rumors, and feature stories and photos; and releasing and exhibiting films in premieres and opulent theaters that underlined the stars' larger-than-life images, the studio publicity departments took over to match a star's personal life with the traits of the screen character. The "audience was assured that the star acted identically in both her 'real' and 'reel' lives" (Klaprat, 1985, p. 360). Publicity, advertising, and "exploitation" crews—organized together like newspaper city rooms and with 60 to 100 employees at their height—would actively create and manipulate the player's image:

> To begin, the department manufactured an authorized biography of the star's personal life based in large part on the successful narrative roles of the star's pictures. The department would disseminate this information by writing features for fan magazines, press releases, and items for gossip columns. A publicist would then be assigned to handle interviews and to supervise the correct choice of makeup and clothing for public appearances. Finally, the department had glamour photographs taken that fixed the important physical and emotional traits of the star in the proper image. (p. 366)

These activities took place within the power-from-the-top studio, with vertical integration allowing firm, though not seamless, jurisdiction.

The appetite for films, film stars, and their movie and private lives had by the 1920s become voracious. By the 1930s, Hollywood was the third largest news source in the country, with some 300 correspondents, including one from the Vatican (Balio, 1985, p. 266). The most important outlets for entertainment celebrity stories were the film fan magazines—*Photoplay, Modern Screen,* and *Silver Screen* had monthly circulations of nearly half a million—and the columns of gossip writers such as Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons (and, publicizing a broader range of people, Walter Winchell in New York). With an eager and sensationalizing press in place by the 1920s, and a fully integrated oligopolistic film industry—by 1930, dominated by the "Big Five" studios—image and information control was not difficult to manage.

EARLY CELEBRITY TEXTS

Other routes to public visibility still existed, of course, but the process had entered a period of industrialization. This, then, was the state of celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century: the entry of visual media as "the prime arbiters of celebrity and the bestowers of honor" (Braudy, 1986, p. 551), a developed profession of public image-management, and an elaborate and tightly controlled production system mass-producing celebrities for a widely consuming audience. The discourse on celebrity[6] remained in this period, for the most part, in line with the interests of its producers. The theme of the discovery of greatness, earlier termed a greatness of character, was translated into the discovery of a combination of "talent," "star quality," and "personality." The claim was in a different vocabulary—the "culture of personality" (Susman, 1984, pp. 273–277) of consumer capitalism had overtaken the "culture of character" of producer-capitalist republic—but it was still one of an organic, merited rise.

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The story of the press agent was alive and well, nearly always harking back to the image of Barnum. The new publicity profession slowly began to get some attention, but in these stories publicity was not a mechanism for creating celebrity but simply a means of bringing the deserving self to the public. At times, however, the new power of publicity media (and studios) to artificially produce fame asserted itself, deepening ambiguities in explanations of claims to fame. The visibility of a publicity "machine" stood as a threat to the notion of naturally derived celebrity status. The simultaneous promotion of audiences to controllers of the publicity machine defused this challenge. Celebrities at the service of the audience, however, brought a new problem: the suspicion that the images presented were constructed to gain an audience. The constant textual exposure of the "real lives" of celebrities—in their more believable, "ordinary" form, supported by a closer audience-celebrity "relationship"—kept this threat at bay.

DISCOVERING THE GIFT: FAME EXPLANATIONS IN EARLY TEXTS

These changes were gradual and never seamless. Greatness in its more traditional, aristocratic formulation—virtue, genius, character, or skill that did not depend on audience recognition—remained a strong model in many early magazine texts. "Greatness," asserted Ludwig (1930) in *American Magazine*, "is always productive, never receptive. It is both imagination and will which give the genius his strength" (p. 15). The notion of a correspondence between greatness and fame, however, was clearly threatened in the early consumer culture. The elitist *Vanity Fair*, for example, was forever striving to distinguish the truly "great" from the commercially successful (see Amory & Bradlee, 1960).

These postures were defensive, and understandably so. As Lowenthal (1968) demonstrated, by the 1920s the typical idols in popular magazines were those of consumption (entertainment, sport) rather than production (industry, business, natural sciences). By the 1940s, almost every hero biography featured a hero either "related to the sphere of leisure time" or "a caricature of a socially productive agent" (p. 115). Most writing about famous people reported on their private lives, personal habits, tastes, and romances. Fan magazines took this sort of story to its extreme, reporting on the specifics of "How Stars Spend Their Fortunes"; exhibiting his home, her pets, their swimming pools; providing their beauty secrets, dietary preferences, expenses, travel plans, advice (see Gelman, 1972; Levin, 1970). In typical stories, Ginger Rogers explained "Why I Like Fried Potatoes" while Hedy Lamarr explained why "A Husband Should Be Made to Shave."

Not only did attention shift to entertainers and their personal lives, but these famous entertainers also underwent a gradual demotion of sorts over the first half of the century. Early on, the stars had been depicted as democratic royalty (with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks reigning), popularly "elected" gods and goddesses. Lifestyle reports focused on "the good life," the lavish Hollywood homes, the expensive clothing, the glamour those watching could not touch. But, pushed by the development of sound and film realism—and, I will argue below, by deeper difficulties—the presentation by the 1930s had become more and more mortal, "prettified versions of the folks who lived just down the block" (Schickel, 1985, p. 99). Rather than the ideal, celebrity was presented in the pages of magazines such as *Life* and *Look* as containing a blown-up version of the typical. "Stars now build

homes, live quietly and raise children," a *Life* article ("The New Hollywood," 1940) explained. "Their homes, once gaudy and too ornate, are now as sensible and sound in taste as any in the country" (p. 65). And, as always, *Life* had the pics to prove it: "candid" shots of Merle Oberon playing blind man's bluff with her nephews on a suburban lawn, Brenda Marshall eating her "frugal breakfast" in a simple, bachelorette kitchen (pp. 65–67).

Such ordinariness promoted a greater sense of connection and intimacy between the famous and their admirers. Crucial to this process was the ubiquitous narrative principle of the "inside" journey into the "real lives" of celebrities, lives much like the readers'. Other common themes in entertainment celebrity texts of the time—love lives, the "price they pay for fame," the desire to be just like the reader, the hard work of gaining and retaining success—further tightened the narrative links between the audience and the celebrated.[7]

Decreasing the distance between the celebrated and the celebrators creates a difficulty: If celebrities were so much like the reader, why were they so elevated and so watched? Early celebrity texts updated the American paradox of egalitarian distinction. Rather than for public virtue or action, the celebrity rose due to his or her *authentic, gifted self.* A fame meritocracy was reinscribed in the new consumerist language: the celebrity rises, selected for his personality (revealed through lifestyle choices), an irrational but nonetheless organic "folk" phenomenon. The luck of the lucky star, for example, is that she got the "break" that allowed her to rise. "Nobody knows," an *American Magazine* (Eddy, 1940) article told its readers, "when or where one of these will bob up" (p. 162). Jean Harlow, driving some friends to a studio luncheon, came to fame "quite by accident," moving "from extra to star" (Lee, 1970, p. 43). The stories in their purest form thus suggested that a star would not rise, or bob up, even with a lucky break—unless he had what it took. As Morin (1960) found in how-to-be-a-star handbooks, "luck is a break, and a break is grace. Hence, no recipe. . . . What matters is the *gift*" (p. 51). It could be cultivated, certainly, and for that reason hard work was important; without it, one might never find out if one had the gift that would be demonstrated by the break. Hard work, however, could do nothing to actually *create* the qualities that might make one famous. Sometimes—as in the lucky break's corollary, the discovery story—one did not need to work, just *be* (Lana Turner sitting in the soda shop). Fame, apparently, would come to those destined to be famous and pass over the doors of the undeserving.

This tautology (how do we know the famous deserve fame? because they have it) is the core of the dominant early story of fame. Talent was often mentioned but rarely treated as sufficient. The only stars who survived, *Photoplay* suggested (Cohn, 1972), were the ones "who had that rare gift designated as screen charm or personality, combined with adaptability and inherent talent" (p. 33). Clark Gable "deserves his pre-eminent place" because "there's no one else exactly like him" (Maddox, 1970, p. 174). What it took to rise—"star quality," "charisma," "appeal," "personality," or simply "It"—was never defined beyond a label, even "ineffable" (Eddy, 1940, p. 25). Whatever it was, though, the texts made it clear that stars had always had it. Fame, based on an indefinable internal quality of the self, was natural, almost predestined.

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The celebrity's background thus took its place as a demonstration that, put simply, a star is born. Ruby Keeler was "born with dancing feet" (Hoyt, 1970, p. 51). Greta Garbo had "a certain force within her" that explained her position "in the vaulted and resplendent cathedral of fame" (Joel, 1970, pp. 172–173). Look back at Greta's childhood and you'll see that the "urge" was always "in her," that "she was a born actress." This presentation of childhood did not build a personal history so much as locate a nebulous *essence* in the famous that explained their fame. Lowenthal's (1968) description of consumption-idol biographies aptly sums up fan and general magazine portrayals as well:

Childhood appears neither as prehistory and key to the character of an individual nor as a stage of transition to the growth and reformation of the abundant diversity of an adult. Childhood is nothing but a midget edition, a predated publication of a [person's] profession and career. *A [person] is an actor, a doctor, a dancer, an entrepreneur, and [she or] he always was.* (pp. 124–125)

Greatness is built in; it is *who you are.* If one works at it, or gets a lucky break, it may be discovered. If it is discovered, one becomes celebrated for it, which is evidence that one had it to begin with.

What do we make of the characteristics of these texts—the focus on leisure idols and leisure habits, the gradual move toward ordinariness, the logic of the discovered gift? In many ways these early texts simply reassert in a new cultural vocabulary that those in the public eye are there because they deserve to be. But why not continue to focus on glamorous and extravagant consumption habits? Why increase the intimacy between star and reader through inside stories? A large part of the answer becomes clear when we examine the place of the new publicity professions and the studio system in these early texts.

EXPOSING THE GIFT: PUBLICITY IN THE EARLY TEXTS

The publicity system was clearly visible and commonly noted in these texts. Writing in *Collier's,* Ferber (1920) observed, "Everyone thinks he knows everything there is to know about moving pictures. Small wonder. The knowledge has been poured down our not unwilling throats by the photoplay magazines, the press agents, the newspapers, the censors, the critics" (p. 7). Initially, this knowledge was not a problem. The studio star system was, for the most part, accommodated quite comfortably into most stories as the final step up the ladder. If the ineffable quality was discovered *and properly publicized,* the story often added, one became celebrated. Like hard work, the studio could not create a star from the ungifted. *Life* reported ("Starlets," 1940), for example, that starlets spent their days in training "that would wilt all but the most determined" (hard work). They were "told what to do, what to say, how to dress, where to go, whom to go with" (studio control). Yet the studio couldn't make them into something they were not: "Only if they obey implicitly and only if, *in addition, by some magic of beauty, personality or talent* [italics added], they touch off an active response in millions of movie fans, will a few of them know the full flower of stardom" (indefinable essence) (p. 37).

The management of publicity was itself generally presented in a way that posed hardly a threat to the notion of natural, deserved celebrity. Stories of Barnum-like

"ballyhoo" press agents persisted, claiming that "the old hokum still gets newspaper space better than anything else" (Lockwood, 1940, p. 180); behind each movie premiere, *Reader's Digest* reported (Costello, 1941), was "a group of harried, sardonic studio press agents . . . [pulling] the strings" (p. 88). This Barnumesque figure was portrayed as a harmless, amusing promoter—harmless because of the visibility of his tricks. The new public relations counselor had, according to most stories, the same aim as the old showman press agent: to "boost the fame" of public figures. Only his style differed: he wore a suit instead of "a sun-struck plug hat and molting fur-lined overcoat" and depended "more upon his typewriter and truth and less upon the imagination" (O'Malley, 1921, p. 56). Since he favored building on facts rather than fiction, he could only *amplify* a preexisting condition. While new inventions meant "an engine of publicity such as the world has never known before," Lippmann (1960) wrote in *Vanity Fair*, that machine "will illuminate whatever we point it at. . . . The machine itself is without morals or taste of any kind, without prejudice or purpose, without conviction or ulterior motive" (p. 121). This new publicity machine had taken a permanent place in the discussion of celebrity by the 1930s.

Although Lippmann pointed out that "newspapermen" were the ones doing the pointing, the dominant notion of publicity in early celebrity texts was of a neutral machine illuminating what "we," the public, wanted to see in the spotlight. The standing model of celebrities as rising organically from the populace would otherwise be jeopardized: if the studios or the newspapers controlled the "machine," people could enter the spotlight not because of popular election but because of manufactured attention by interested elites. The "public" in these stories, modeled as a unified, powerful near-person forever casting its votes for its favorite personalities, became a crucial character in its own right. The notion of the public as an entity that "owned" both space and the public figures inhabiting it runs consistently through both general and fan magazines. In a 1932 *Vanity Fair* (in Amory & Bradlee, 1960), Mussolini, the Prince of Wales, George Bernard Shaw, William Randolph Hearst, and others romp in bathing suits "On the Public's Beach." The public, forever "fickle," was increasingly credited with *control* of celebrity.

As celebrities were being demoted to ordinariness in narratives, then, the audience was being promoted from a position of religious prostration. The public became the final discoverer, the publicity machine shifting the spotlights according to the public's whims. Myrna Loy tells "all you little Marys and Sues and Sarahs who wish you could be movie stars" (Service, 1970) that she is, in fact, *at their service.*

I'd like to tell her in good plain English that I am not my own boss. I'd like to tell her that I serve not one boss but several million. For my boss is—the Public. My boss is that very girl who writes me herself and thousands like her. It is the Public that first hired me, and it is the Public that can fire me. The Public criticizes me, reprimands me. (p. 142)

The celebrity-as-public-servant displaces difficult questions in the relationship between "authentic" greatness and publicity activities. It affirms the notion that celebrities are cream risen to the top while allowing the vague criterion of "personality" to coexist with the newly visible power of the publicity "machine." *You* control the machine, it says. If *you* don't like me, *you* can grab the spotlight and throw it onto someone else more worthy. The anti-democratic implications of both a

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In a remarkably obsequious, and revealing, rumination on the question of "Why Did I Slip?" Robert Taylor (1970) turned to the fans in control. "Maybe temperament is the trick that captures the public imagination. Should an actor be erratic and difficult, or should he be business-like, stable, and quiet?" (p. 124). Taylor's article, while it contained the characteristic direct apostrophe and bow to the power of the public, also revealed a theme that grew in early texts along with that of public control. What image should I put on? he asks. The assumption that people are famous because of *who they are,* an authentic self, gets left behind as Taylor suggests that he will be *who you want me to be.* In one, audiences discover; in the other, audiences dictate.

Indeed, as the power of the audience to create stars to their liking became a stronger narrative ingredient, an alternative storyline also developed. The more active the audience, the more celebrity is suspect as an artificial image created and managed to pander to that audience. Terms of commerce began to enter the discourse, although still subordinated to terms of greatness and quality. Commercial creation and the marketing of false public images (as opposed to publicizing of true selves) began to surface as an explanation of fame. Myrna Loy, significantly slipping between public-as-boss and studio-as-boss, complained that

I daren't take any chances with Myrna Loy, for she isn't my property. . . . I couldn't even go [to the corner drugstore] without looking "right," you see. Not because of personal vanity, but because the studio has spent millions of dollars on the personality known as Myrna Loy. And I can't let the studio down by slipping off my expensive mask of glamor. I've got to be, on all public occasions, the personality they sell at the box office. (Service, 1970, p. 214)

Marlene Dietrich, a 1930s *Motion Picture* writer argued, was nothing but manufactured glamour. Through the use of publicity stunts, lighting effects, photography, and Dietrich's single talent—"simulating glamour"—she became famous. "The difference between Miss Dietrich in real life and Miss Dietrich in the photograph," Boehnel (1970) argued, "was the difference between a handsome woman and one built up by studio artifice into a glamorous idol" (p. 218). Here a story was taking shape that gained steam as the century progressed: studio artifice, in search of box office sales, created images that had little or nothing to do with the actual persons behind them. As early as 1931, *The Nation* ("Fame," 1931), wrote that fame "is largely manufactured and that those best known are those who have seen to it that they should be" (p. 450). By 1944, an *American Mercury* writer ("Celebrity Unlimited," 1944) was arguing that celebrity had become a "lush, weedy thing" choking "many a rare plant of genuine accomplishment" (pp. 204–205)—a perspective that would become more popular in the following decades.

This rising skepticism about the connection between celebrity and authenticity was, however, largely muted in most celebrity stories. To a degree, this was simply accomplished through studio control. When Clark Gable suggested in a 1933 *Photoplay* interview, for example, that "I just work here. . . . The company has an investment in me. It's my business to work, not to think," his statement was considered "frank enough to be dangerous and the studio thereafter began to 'protect' Gable from unguarded utterances" (King, 1986, p. 174).

But the skepticism heightened by increasingly visible publicity activities was contained more commonly by being acknowledged: by pulling down "the expensive mask of glamor." By embracing the notion that celebrity images were artificial products and inviting readers to visit the real self *behind* those images, popular magazines partially defused the notion that celebrity was really derived from *nothing but* images. Celebrity profiling became parked in expose gear, instructions in the art of distinguishing truth from artifice, the real Dietrich from the fake one. Once you get to know the real one, the texts implied, you'll see why you were right to have made her famous. The at-home-with-the-famous "inside story" was central to this process. The glamorous celebrity was thus sacrificed for the more "realistic" down-to-earth one. Intimacy, bolstering belief, was offered up. Manufactured images, then, would be harmless to allegiances. The public discovers and makes famous certain people because it (with the help of the magazines) *sees through* the publicity-generated, artificial self to the real, deserving, special self. The story of celebrity as a natural phenomenon was shakily joined with the story of celebrity as an artificial one.

SELF-OWNED COMMODITIES: LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY CELEBRITY

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the film industry was jolted from several sides. In 1948 the Supreme Court unanimously sided with the Department of Justice in its charges against the industry, breaking the Big Five's production-distribution-exhibition monopoly (Balio, 1985, p. 402). The industry was also facing a box office crisis: by 1950, the movie audience had shrunk by two-thirds. The crisis was much aggravated by television, which was fast displacing film as the dominant leisure-time activity.[8]

This shake-up of the movie studio system meant changes in industry organizational structure and new entrants in the field. Independent production companies began to grow. Studios shifted to contracting on a picture-by-picture basis rather than "owning" workers for longer periods. Talent agents, whose role earlier had been marginal, moved in, taking on tasks abandoned by the studios: cultivating "talent," selecting "properties" to develop, taking "the long view." Agents began to be important power-brokers, and the "packages" they offered—a writer, script, a star or two, sometimes a director—became (and remain) the currency of the industry (Balio, 1985, pp. 418–419). Eventually, despite changes in ownership patterns, the system stabilized in its new form: the majors still dominating, collaborating with the television industry and with talent agents and agencies, absorbing independent production. While the economic drive toward a star system remained in this changed environment, new players entered the game from the now-dispersed subindustries of star-making and from the new television industry, and strategies began to shift to meet the new environmental requirements.

As studio control was necessarily relaxed and the studio image-maintenance activities became dispersed into an independent publicity profession, film stars in the 1950s became "proprietors of their own image," which they could sell to filmmakers, and subsequently began "to show a distance from their own image" (King, 1986, pp. 169–170). Independent publicists, assistants in the management of

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In the meantime, the publicity profession was taking new, more sophisticated shapes. Since World War II, public relations (PR) has grown "from a one-dimensional 'press agentry' function into a sophisticated communications network connecting the most powerful elements of our society" (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985, p. 27). This growth contained several components that affect celebrity. First, the overall trend toward delineating and targeting specialized market niches in product development, advertising, and sales has made the task of garnering and shaping attention progressively more "scientific." Strategies attempt to zero in on the perceived needs, desires, and knowledge of particular publics, seeking to attract and then sell the attention of segments of the mass markets, matching certain populations to specific messages and vehicles.[9] Second, as the daily practices and interests of PR operatives and journalists, aligned since the 1920s, moved closer over these decades, arenas traditionally perceived as non-entertainment (news in particular) have come to depend on the practices of the entertainment industry, and celebrity in particular. Third, the technologies for providing a visual image that *imitates the representation* of an activity, event, or person, rather than representing it directly, have become highly developed.[10] Finally, the outlets for publicity have exploded with the success, beginning in the early 1970s, of magazine and newspaper writing about "people" and "personality" and, more recently, broadcast "infotainment." This has meant a need for more subject matter, and more opportunities for recognition: literally more editorial space for those aspiring to fame or to regain faded recognition, for star-for-a-day ordinary people,[11] and for celebrities from untapped fields.

Television, with its constant flow, enormous reach, and vast space-filling needs, has from its initial boom provided the most significant new outlet for image-creation.[12] In this world of massive exposure to television's sophisticated image-production, it has become increasingly possible *in a practical sense* to create familiarity with images without regard to content. Boorstin (1961) noted the effect: the celebrity has become familiar for being familiar, "a person who is known for his well-knownness" (p. 57). The economic push to make people known for themselves rather than for their actions remains at the heart of the now-decentralized star system: as sales aids, celebrities are most useful if they can draw attention regardless of the particular context in which they appear. Name recognition in itself is critical for commerce. In fact, the less attached a name is to a context, the more easily it transfers to new markets. As the prime outlet for, disseminator of, and certifier of public images, television has made decontextualized fame a ubiquitous currency.

CELEBRITY TEXTS IN THE LATE TWENTIETH CENTURY

The changes in the apparatuses and practices of publicity in the post-glamour, television-dominated era have seeped into celebrity texts. In the later twentieth century several new elements entered gradually into the celebrity discourse. First and most generally, the mechanisms by which images are made and by which celebrity is built have been increasingly exposed. Second, celebrity as a commercial

enterprise has been not only acknowledged but often embraced. Third, the audience has been invited to increase its knowledge and its power. Finally, the discourse has brought about an increasing self-consciousness and irony about celebrity.

Although the narratives about and explanations of fame developed in the earlier part of the century have remained commonplace, the challenge from the manufacture-of-fame narrative has been greatly amplified. No longer under institutional guard, it has become a very serious contender in explaining celebrity. Invitations into the process and an ironic stance about it, I argue, operate much like the invitations into the "real lives" of the famous (which continue from the 1920s). They partially defuse the threats the process makes to the notion that fame is rooted in character traits, that admiration of celebrities is grounded in merit.

CELEBRITY-MAKING REVEALED

With *TV Guide,* which began in 1948, then quickly grew in circulation and has since the early 1970s been one of the two top-selling magazines in the United States, celebrity-making as a business moved from a peripheral to a central theme. "Why," an article ("Does TV Drama Need a Star System?" 1953), asked, "is there a lack of star-studded names in TV dramas?" (p. 6). The answer is simply that "building a 'star' " costs too much, and "few, if any, performers make the top without the Big Buildup. It's a selling job that requires an organized bunch of legmen, plenty of time and lots of cash" (p. 6). The presence or lack of stars was not, in this story, a question of talent resources, but of sales resources. A few years later, one performer's summary of the "feeling among performers" ("For the Stars," 1956, p. 6) about answering fan mail stands in stark contrast to earlier treatments of mail-answering and autographing as a sort of public service. "Stardom is a business," she says matter-of-factly. "It would be bad business to ignore a fan" (p. 6). A "shrewd agent," an agent tells readers in a later article, "knows how to make Hollywood pay, what image is wanted on the market, where shortages exist, how to fill niches" (Hobson, 1968, p. 6).

Visible links between celebrity and selling were certainly not new. Fame as a sales device had been evident within advertising very early on, primarily through endorsements. Beginning in the 1950s, however, celebrity began to be commonly represented not only as *useful to* selling and business, but as a business itself, *created by* selling. Along with the old-style "what success does to the stars" and "life at home with the stars" stories, for example, *TV Guide* showed stars bickering over billing ("Television's Biggest Struggle," 1958), arguing that "I'm a piece of merchandise. The bigger they make my name, the more important I am. And, the more important I am, the more money I'm worth" (p. 21). This stance, which in the early days of studio celebrity was rare and sometimes punished, rapidly became fairly commonplace. Terms began to change: the celebrity was becoming "merchandise," "inventory," "property," a "product," a "commodity," and the fans "markets." Star production, said Kendall (1962) in a *New York Times Magazine* article, "is as ritualistic in its way as a fire dance" (p. 37). Celebrities are an "investment"—"like all raw materials, they often require a good deal of processing before they are marketable"— and that investment "must be protected" (p. 38).

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took hold, the question of how exactly that production worked became central. By the 1960s, *TV Guide* was offering instructions in "how to manufacture a celebrity" (Efron, 1967, p. 16). Detailing the case of Barbara Walters, the author demonstrated how the "mechanical assembly line" created celebrities from raw human material: Walters was picked up in small feature stories, then profiled in *Life* and *TV Guide,* provided with professional recognition, then "piped into the lecture circuit" and into commercials, which turned her into a "personality" (p. 17). Then "certain characteristic things began to happen to her—*none of which had anything to do with her professional skills*" (p. 17). She was now "being courted as a 'name'" (p. 17). Her wardrobe, home, and cosmetic habits became women's magazine topics; she appeared on talk shows and at "fancy" parties. Even Walters can recognize her own manufacture, chatting "candidly about the meaningless mechanics of fabricated fame" (p. 19). Several years later, a press agent was quoted saying that his client, Ann-Margret, could initially have been "sold ... as anything": "She was a new product. We felt there was a need in The Industry for a female Elvis Presley. We mounted her on a billboard on Sunset Strip with her legs around a motorcycle. I saw emerge a star without the benefit of major industry achievement" (Hobson, 1969, p. 10). A 1967 article (Amory, 1967) quoted the coordinator of a star-grooming program: The "whole thing nowadays" is "just a big machine. When they push the button, they grind out the name" (p. 33).

"Make no mistake," that article continued, "the people who push the button nowadays ... are primarily publicity people" (Amory, 1967, p. 33). As the focus on the celebrity-making machine continued, publicity people became central characters, as named sources and as profile subjects. In many cases, the publicity system has remained in the same place it had been earlier, subordinated to innate characteristics—sometimes talent, usually the same vague notions of "star quality" and "personality"—and guided by public desires. In 1988, Geraldo Rivera asked a personal manager and two television producers to tell his TV-show audience what "star quality" was. Their typical answers echo the 1930s and 1940s texts: "I would say it's potential," said one; "it's the ability to feel," said another; it's "the ability to light a television up or a movie screen" ("How to Make It in Hollywood," 1988, pp. 3–4). In these cases, image managers have continued to be represented (often by themselves) as giving the public what they want, not by creating it but by discovering and publicizing it.

Also commonly, though, celebrity-production and -control activities have been explicitly discussed, with "quality" as a concept absent, irrelevant, old-fashioned. "Image" has itself become a common term in the texts. In earlier days, an agent was typically shown discovering star quality that simply demanded to be brought to the public, and the subsequent adoration was proof of the quality. Now, a shrewd agent was shown discovering a market and manufacturing a celebrity-product around it. A 1963 series on "Gentlemen of the Pressure" (Morgan, 1963) opened with an illustration of a giant hand holding a television screen on which the word "images" is written. Behind the hand, operating it through a panel marked "networks," is a messy, motley group of people; in front of it, a happy, smiling audience looks at the screen. "A mixed breed of nonobjective salesmen have found a home in the house of TV," the author warned, selling "affection for personalities, products, corporate

entities and ideas" (p. 6). Their effects are "a little frightening," and "although they prefer to work in the shadows, they leave their traces on every TV screen in America" (p. 6).

The interview process itself began to be dissected for its control aspects. "The impresario of the Hollywood interview is the press agent," wrote one journalist, "who is trained to assess the writer and publication and then cut off at the pass embarassing situations" (Bell, 1966, p. 115). Another described how "stars and their press agents will arrange a location that will fortify the basic image they wish to present to the public," will "channel the discussion into those very few areas where the star can excel conversationally," and "look upon The Interview as an opportunity to convince the world at large that they are something quite different than they seem to be" (Bart, 1966).

Publicity agents and managers have been drawn into the narrative, coaching the public figure in "how to look cool in talk-show hot seats" (Shaw, 1982, p. 56), sitting next to (or even replacing) the celebrity during an interview, and overseeing the touching-up of photos. "Publicists rule the day," a *Rolling Stone* (Hirschberg, 1986) article explained. "The bigger the star, the more power the publicist wields. And this power enables publicists to choose the photographer for a fashion shoot, pick a sympathetic writer for an interview or demand the cover of a magazine" (p. 28). Several years later, *Time* (Henry, 1990) outlined how celebrity is "available to any Manhattan couple with about $100,000 to squander," by adopting the right charities, being photographed at the right spots, and hiring public relations counselors, who "now serve everybody from models and movie stars to lawyers and landlords" (p. 48). These are not the harmless "ballyhoodlums" revealed in some early twentieth-century texts, but sophisticated business operators. Throughout these texts, then, is a tremendously heightened self-consciousness about the systematic production of celebrity and celebrity-images for commercial purposes.

ENJOY THE HYPE: INSTRUCTION AND IRONY

With such increased visibility, the problem that had surfaced occasionally in the first half of the century has deepened during the second: if celebrities are artificial creations, why should an audience remain attached and lavish attention on their fabricated lives? Along with the gradual foregrounding of artifice have come new narrative elements that, I argue, temper this problem. Texts have brought in what amount to instructions to readers and a new ironic knowingness.

Many such texts have brought to fruition the behind-the-scenes, inside-dope style begun earlier, instructing the reader further in reading performances, finding the "real" behind the "image." This writing acknowledges that a gap between image and reality exists, but denies that bridging it is a problem, especially with television, a medium that can't help but transmit an "accurate, searching image" (Javits, 1960, p. 11). "The TV camera has an X-ray attachment," Arlene Francis told *TV Guide* readers in 1960. "It pierces, it penetrates, it peels away the veneer. It communicates the heart and mind of man" (p. 6). Not surprisingly, this argument runs with the older-style emphasis on a person's "genuine," internal characteristics. If there is a problem peeling away the veneer, viewers need simply be given better viewing tools, and readers can depend on the writer to provide the person under-

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Many texts, though, have become more up-front and unapologetic about artificial authenticity, instructing readers in how to be more sophisticated in recognizing and using it themselves. Groucho Marx's "You Bet Your Life," *TV Guide* disclosed ("The Truth," 1954), "represents the finest *manufactured spontaneity* television has yet known" (p. 5). That, the article claims, is simply professionalism, the business of "concocting entertainment." One 1950s article ("Familiar Gestures," 1954) prompted readers to pay attention to television stars' familiar, unconscious gestures which, converted into conscious performances like Eddie Cantor's eye-popping, could "serve as trademarks." By the 1980s, *Rolling Stone* (Martel, 1987) was sardonically claiming that the key to everyone's inevitable encounter with fame is preparation: "No self-respecting modern person should be without fifteen minutes' worth of the props, costumes and condiments that are vital to the maintenance of fame" (p. 91).

A final set of "instructions" has taken the inside-story theme a small, subtle step further. As stories of how the publicity system works both to manufacture celebrity and to fabricate sincerity have become more common (especially with the growth of "infotainment" in the 1970s and 1980s), the audience has been instructed not simply in viewing the self behind the image (what the star really thinks, wears, does) but in viewing the fabrication process (how the celebrity is being constructed to amuse). Armed with knowledge about the process, the audience doesn't need to believe or disbelieve the hype, just enjoy it. Barnum, disembodied and ubiquitous, has reappeared as a central character: the celebrity industry.

An ironic, winking tone in these revelatory texts is one of the clearest later twentieth century developments, not only in "hipster" magazines[13] but also in more mainstream "middle American" ones. The audience has been invited to take its power further with a new, cynical distance from the production of celebrity and celebrity images. In a 1977 report on overcrowding in the "celebrity industry," *Newsweek* ("The People Perplex," 1977) waxed sarcastic, suggesting the foundation of a "National Celebrity Commission to select, at the earliest possible age, a rotating galaxy of Designated People" who would be "scientifically schooled in the art of outrageous behavior" (p. 90). A decade later, an *Esquire* writer (Ephron, 1989) claimed that the strategy of cloaking oneself in goodness by "[buying] a lesser disease, preferably one that primarily affected children," no longer works, since "all the lesser diseases were taken" (p. 104). *Life* magazine ("The Making of Billy Gable," 1989) consulted "industry bigfoots" on how Clark Gable would fare starting out today. The experts recommended plastic surgery ("deflating those wind socks"), publicity control ("a spin doctor"), image building ("have him sitting at ringside for fights and Laker games"), and television series and talk shows. "Were Gable a young actor today," the article concluded, "he would require careful packaging to make him the King of this era" (pp. 53–54). A *TV Guide* article (Warga, 1982) traced the "three stages" of stardom, each turning on the manipulation of image and publicity apparatus. In stage one, the performer is eager, and "you see, hear and read about him or her everywhere"; in stage two, the successful celebrity is

temperamental, and appearances now "depend on the publication, the subjects *not* to be discussed, who else will be in the story, whether or not the cover will be included"; in stage three, "the great holdout," the star exits, because "nothing is right" (pp. 4–5). Each stage is a pose. The reader, armed with a cynical knowledge about image manipulation strategies, is being told how to read the pose as a pose. Instructively, what lies behind the pose is not taken up.

Irony has also become a common piece of celebrity public personae. "A self-mocking sense of humor," according to casting directors in a *TV Guide* story (Stauth, 1988), "is a key ingredient in star quality" (p. 5). Celebrities are often caught "simultaneously mocking and indulging their icon status," Gitlin (1989) says, describing a collection of *Rolling Stone* photographs. "New-style stars flaunt and celebrate stardom by mocking it, camping it up, or underplaying it (in public!). . . . The star now stands apart from glamour, and comments (often ironically) on it" (p. 14). In *Esquire* (June 1989), then–Republican Party leader Lee Atwater, joining the posing of entertainment celebrities, saluted the audience with his pants around his ankles.

Why this combination of exposure of the celebrity- and image-manufacturing processes and mockery of it? On one level, the mocking of glamour by celebrities is another star turn, much like tabloid revelations of the "true self," updated to accommodate the visibility of glamour-production: Celebrities invite their admirers to revere them for being "too hip to be reverent or revered" (Gitlin, 1989, p. G14). The constant visibility of publicity mechanisms works similarly on another level, defusing a threat to admiration by offering the audience the position of control. Celebrity audiences are treated to the knowledge of how they, and others, become the "sucker born every minute"—and thus avoid becoming the sucker.

In Barnum, though, the source of tricks was simple and visible. In the later twentieth century texts everyone is a potential trickster, and image-makers and hypesters are everywhere, including in the audience. Who is real? Who really has "star quality" or "talent" or "greatness"? Who actually deserves attention? These questions, still circulating from the earlier fame story, are unanswered—this time because they are largely rendered moot. The notion that fame is based in artifice challenges not only the economics of the celebrity system (if no one is more deserving, consumer loyalty is extremely unstable) but potentially readers as well (if artifice and reality are indistinguishable, one's grounding is extremely unstable). The cynical, knowing, sometimes mocking stance keeps the tension from cracking the story; indeed, it can serve to engage. Miller's comments (1988) about televisual irony have more general application here:

TV seems to flatter the inert skepticism of its own audience, assuring them that they can do no better than to stay right where they are, rolling their eyes in feeble disbelief. . . . [Each] subtle televisual gaze . . . offers not a welcome but an ultimatum—that we had better see the joke or else turn into it. . . . [The] TV viewer does not gaze up at the screen with angry scorn or piety, but—perfectly enlightened—looks down on its images with a nervous sneer which cannot threaten them and which only keeps the viewer himself from standing up. (pp. 326, 331)

Through irony, these celebrity texts reposition their readers, enlightened about the falseness of celebrity, to "see the joke" and avoid the disruptive notion that there is

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CONCLUSION: DEMOCRATIC CELEBRITY?

The overall history sketched here is of a position switch between two twentieth-century takes on the famous. The struggle by many involved in representing celebrity has been to keep the economics of stardom intact by making celebrity-admiration a coherent enterprise. The economic interests of celebrity producers push toward certain textual characteristics (a coincidence of public and private personae, an explanation of fame as naturally derived and deserved). Celebrity production, when revealed, contains its own potential threat: the explanation of fame as artificially derived. In the early part of the century, the organization of production allowed tight control over the texts. To the degree that the story of artificial production did assert itself, it was accompanied by narrative elements that quieted it (audience control of publicity, the inside story, de-glamorizing). As production organization changed mid-century and "authorship" of the texts was decentralized, the notion of artificial fame was released and intensified in texts. Through discussions of images as images, flattery of audiences' notions of their own knowledge and power, and an ironic stance, celebrity texts have continued to negotiate the tension between the two claims-to-fame stories.

Embedded in these two stories is the long-standing pull between the democratic and the aristocratic in fame discourse. Ought attention go to a naturally deserving elite, or is everyone and no one more deserving? The struggles between these stories described raise important questions about the dynamics of public visibility in democratic, consumer-capitalist society. Do commercial industries dependent on the production of celebrity push in anti-democratic directions by building mystifying myths of meritocratic fame and offering pseudo-participation? Or do they push in democratic directions by empowering audiences, generally in the form of markets, to shape celebrities?[14] Does the embrace of artifice undermine democratic discourse by pushing toward the replacement of reason with image? Or does it support democratic involvement by opening up participation—with lip-synching, anyone can be a star—and decreasing the social gap between the admired and the admirer? The strained and often paradoxical coexistence of the two major storylines examined here does not answer these questions. It may, however, suggest an interesting and critical oddity: that the answer to all of these questions may be yes.

NOTES

[1]Articles from early fan magazines were drawn primarily from two compilations (Gelman, 1972; Levin, 1970). Articles from general-interest periodicals and newspapers were derived from selected years in the *Reader's Guide to Periodicals* and from the archives of the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.

[2]The perceived interests of the burgeoning newspaper industry, especially in the circulation wars and "yellow journalism" in the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, in fact made stories about *people* a central feature of journalism. In particular, newspapermen like William Randolph Hearst used "human symbols whose terror, anguish, or sudden good fortune, whatever, seemed to dramatically summarize some local event or social problem or social tragedy" (Schickel, 1985, p. 40) to provide them with a

competitive edge in the increasingly information-dense environment. Names, in short, began to make news.

[3]Filmmakers in the first decade of this century referred to players by "singling out a striking physical feature of the nameless owner"—such as "the girl with the curls," "the sad–eyed man," "the fat guy" (Walker, 1970, p. 29). In part, players were not named and advertised because "names" cost money. In part, May suggests, early film directors "saw their art as separate from the entertainment popular with the rich and the immigrants," and subordinated character to the "larger message of the plot" (May, 1980, pp. 99–100). Finally, exhibition in nickelodeons—20- to 60-minute programs, morning to midnight, often changing daily—was a handicap to the emergence of film stars since, with "no time for word-of-mouth publicity to build up a following" for players, "they might not be available for very long when the fans wanted to see them" (Walker, 1970, pp. 29–30).

[4]In 1909 the Edison Company began publicizing its acquisition of theatrical players from Broadway producers; in 1910, Leman and Vitagraph introduced lobby-card photo displays of their acting companies (Balio, 1985, p. 114). At the same time, independent producers drew on Barnumesque techniques to manufacture film star celebrity (p. 115). In March of 1910, Carl Laemmle, in an attempt to give his independent production company an edge, demonstrated the possibilities of star-building. He hired Florence Lawrence, who was already recognizable as "the Biograph Girl," and apparently planted a story of her tragic, untimely death. He subsequently denounced the story as a lie and as proof announced Lawrence's appearance in St. Louis—the first public appearance in film history—where she made a tremendous publicity splash.

[5]The early star system was aided in its development by innovations in the use of film as a medium. In particular, the close-up, brought into film by D. W. Griffith around 1908, allowed the face to take over the screen. The close-up provided the star system with two critical characteristics. The focus on the face, with signs of emotion greatly magnified, established a sense of intimacy between audience and stranger-performer. And, by "isolating and concentrating the player's looks and personality, sometimes unconnected with his or her abilities," it provided a means to establishing a performer's "unique" personality (Walker, 1970, p. 21). The apparent revelation by the close-up of the "unmediated personality of the individual," (Balazs, quoted in Dyer, 1979) has pointed out, "and this *belief* in the 'capturing' of the 'unique' 'person' of a performer" (p. 17), is essential for the star phenomenon. The coming of sound in the late 1920s further shortened the psychological distance between performer and audience, and further increased the apparent uniqueness and "realness" of the apprehended performer. "What seemed to be their last significant secret, their tones of voice," writes Schickel (1985), "was now revealed—or so it seemed" (p. 99). No longer pantomimed emotion, performance was less stylized; with voices, performers were less unlike the audiences.

[6]The celebrity production systems and the discourse examined here are primarily those connected with visual entertainment. Celebrity certainly exists in other sectors, and certainly the characteristics of its production and the discourse surrounding it differ in the various sectors. In sports, for example, the link between exposure and achievement or talent may be tighter (though perhaps much less tight than many people assume); in politics and religion, the tolerance for exposure of image-manipulation may be lower (though perhaps much higher than many people assume). Although these instructive differences are important, I work from two simple premises that suggest visual entertainment is the most important case. First, film and television have been and continue to be this century's major popular media, those that figure most constantly in daily lives and consciousnesses. Second, other sectors have become increasingly dependent on visual media and have taken on many of the strategies and characteristics of entertainment-celebrity production.

[7]Celebrities, in fact, began to address readers directly, often as confidantes: "I regret more than I can say that my marriage with Hal Rosson did not work out," wrote Jean Harlow to her *"Screen Book Friends"* (in Levin, 1970, p. 25). Joan Crawford confessed in a 1928 *Photoplay* that she hadn't told her life story because "I was afraid to tell it to you. You have one idea of Joan Crawford, now you are going to have another" (p. 88).

[8]The spread of American television was notoriously rapid: the number of sets in use in 1947 was around 14,000 and by the next year had shot to 172,000; by 1950, it reached 4 million, by 1954 eight times more, and by the late fifties television was in 90 percent of American homes (Balio, 1985, p. 401).

[9]Beginning in the early 1960s, with the "values and life styles" research of the Stanford Research

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Institute, the advertising industry has slowly abandoned class-based marketing for marketing that "hones in on a consumer's 'lifestyle' (marital status, education, region, sex) and 'attitudes' (religion, ambition, optimism, etc.)" (Sullivan, 1989, p. 37). In the world of television, this trend is well captured by the "Performer Q," issued since the early 1970s by a company called Marketing Evaluations. Ranking some 500 celebrities according to a survey of American families, it provides subscribers with "a demographic road map" for each celebrity, breaking down his or her audience appeal by sex, age, income, education, and occupation (Barber, 1974).

[10]Publicity practitioners, especially by making use of new video technology, have become masters at delivering entertaining news to news organizations. The electronic press release, "imitation news," is now commonplace. Originating in the film industry, these releases have "the feel of a genuine news story, right down to the imperfect oratory as the interview subjects gather their thoughts on camera." In entertainment PR, these releases are often highly advanced and widely used: some include multiple stories (personality profiles, "news features," etc.) on a dual soundtrack that allows a reporter to dub in his or her own voice, art work, scripts, and "teaser" commercials for the news program to use. Universal Studios sends video interviews into which local reporters can insert tapes of themselves asking questions, thus appearing to "be rubbing elbows with the Hollywood elite" (Blyskal & Blyskal, 1985, pp. 99–102).

[11]"We're scouring every facet of American life for stars," said *People* magazine editor Richard Stolley in 1977 ("The People Perplex", 1977). "We haven't changed the concept of the magazine. We're just expanding the concept of 'star' " (p. 90).

[12]It is an environment, moreover, with new characteristics: tremendous repetition, allowing increased familiarity; a literal down-sizing of the celebrity due to television's small size and living-room location, bringing, as Schickel (1985) points out, "famous folks into our living room in psychically manageable size"; an increased "illusion of intimacy" (p. 13) between celebrities and audience built through "reality" programming, most significantly talk shows; and a near-total ratings dependence with pressure to hold onto the few perceived "hit" elements and replace the elements that may not be selling, leading to rapid turnover. Focus, though repeated, is diffuse; turnover is rapid. Television's attention is easier to get and more difficult to hold onto.

[13]At least one magazine, *Spy*, has made its name and its money from this combination of inside dope and mockery. A regular feature lists the number of mentions given particular people in Liz Smith's gossip column. An April 1989 cover story on "celebrity garbage" offers "coffee grounds of the rich and famous—a scientific, sanitary and not at all unseemly SPY investigation"; in June, "the current bull market for selling one's soul." A 1990 cover story ("The State of Celebrity 1990") on "building a better celebrity" reports on "what America thinks about celebrities, what celebrities will do to keep themselves celebrated, what nobodies will do to become famous" (p. 59) and features a mock-scientific survey and analysis of public opinion, with percentages of people believing that Drew Barrymore is dead, agreeing that "nearly every celebrity has been to the Playboy mansion" (p. 61), or willing to sacrifice a limb to win an Oscar. The accompanying list, a "surgical history of celebrity," includes the celebrity's name, rumored cosmetic surgery—and their "publicist's denial" (pp. 66–67).

[14]Schudson (personal communication, May 30, 1991) points out that contemporary objections to the phenomenon of celebrity, usually attacking celebrity-manufacturing institutions and/or the divorce of fame and achievement (for example, see Boorstin, 1961; Goldsmith, 1983), contain a nostalgic longing for "heroism" along aristocratic lines, perhaps amounting to veiled attacks on democracy. In *High Visibility* (Rein, Kotler & Stoller, 1987), a remarkably unapologetic how-to book that "applies marketing science to the quest for celebrity" (p. 6), the authors make a similar point about their detractors. Social critics, whose "conception of a perfectly ordered hierarchy is under relentless attack by the celebrity world" (p. 10) and believe that "society elevates precisely the wrong people into popular acclaim" (p. 9), are really angry "that they themselves don't control the process" (p. 29).

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