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THE PROMOTION AND PRESENTATION OF THE SELF

Celebrity as Marker of Presentational Media

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Introduction

Over the last 15 years, there have been two moments where the regular decrying of the vacuity of celebrity culture appeared to gain some traction. One can recall the outrage of fellow celebrities after Diana’s death in 1997 and the chorus of the famous proclaiming that the hounding of celebrities must stop; the invasion of privacy had just crossed well beyond the boundary of propriety and entered into the illegality of harassment (Roberts 1997). Similarly, in post 9–11 America in particular, there was the month in 2001 of the new sobriety in popular culture where celebrity represented everything that was excessively insignificant. Adding to the new sobriety was the parade of celebrities led by George Clooney and Tom Hanks presenting their serious support for the real heroes of America – the fire-fighters and the police who gave their lives to save others while the Twin Towers collapsed (Beach 2001). In both these cases, celebrity culture represented a new unwanted excess that needed to be reined into the structure of a civil society. And in both these cases, apart from a temporary chastising blip, celebrity culture continued and perhaps even intensified in new ways and permutations.

The question I want to answer here is why: why does celebrity and celebrity culture continue to hold its fascination? A corollary question I want to address is, given the shifted structure of media and entertainment industries in the twenty-first century, what do celebrities continue to address that is so essential to contemporary culture? These questions have to be prefaced by the fact that the lament contained in these two moments detailed above is not anomalous. It is ever-present and helps to maintain the duality with which we hold the overwhelming production of celebrity: collectively, we disdain the public focus on celebrity at the same time as we continue to watch, discuss and participate and thereby ensure the maintenance of a celebrity industry.

The first dimension of an answer to the questions is that celebrity has been and is increasingly a pedagogical tool and specifically a pedagogical aid in the discourse of the self. For much of the twentieth century, celebrities served as beacons of the public world. They helped define the Zeitgeist of any particular moment – ‘a structure of feeling’ that relied in part on its mediation through film, radio, popular music and television. Thus, the stories of how women’s hairstyles of the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s were determined by the screen icons of the Hollywood industry in the United States represents a basic example of how their representations moved into the cultural world. Similarly, Clarke Gable’s singlet or JFK’s hatless inauguration also shaped sartorial style, at least in the United States. There are examples of the power of screen icons to embody a mood – James Dean, for instance, through his role in Rebel without a Cause (1955), embodied a general fear of the angst in 1950s youth culture. The examples of this representative power of celebrities are legion as well as diverse. The impact of music videos in the 1980s, for instance, provided a panoply of styles and attitude that migrated transnationally with surprising force. Certain
celebrities were able to capitalise on these changes in origins and powers of representation. For example, Madonna became an expert at translating subcultural style for its wider mediation through popular music, performance and music videos for more than two decades. In turn, her appropriation of subcultural style percolated through popular culture and fashion.

The pedagogy of the celebrity has served very particular purposes throughout the twentieth century. Celebrity taught generations how to engage and use consumer culture to ‘make’ oneself. In a number of treatises on advertising and consumer culture, cultural critics have identified how the individual had to be taught how to consume and to recognise the value of consumption for their own benefit (for example, Leiss et al. 2005, Story 1999, Toland and Mueller 2003). Instead of making clothes, it was much easier to have them made for you and use wages – as Ewen (1975) has explained as wage slavery – to capture the latest fashion and the most recent style. Shops provided the pathways to a consumer world which represented possibility and potential as much as a participation in a wider and connected culture (Schudson 1984) that was cross-linked with entertainment culture and its stars. What is less developed in these critiques of consumer culture is that pedagogic work performed to transform a more traditional culture into a consumer culture was very much dependent upon celebrities and their capacity to embody the transformative power writ large of consumer culture. Also generally missing in the studies of advertising and consumer culture was a further key element in that this transformation of the individual into consumer is not the shift to consumption from production but a shift to a wider and more pervasive production of the self. The production of the self implies the mutability of the production process, as it is built from the array of possible forms of consumption and expression that these types of consumption provided for the individual.

Because of celebrity’s centrality in what can be defined as self-production, the elaborate celebrity gossip can be seen as providing a continuity of discourse around the presentation of the self for public consumption. The pedagogy of the celebrity in the twentieth century can be read as a very elaborate morality tale that mapped a private world into a public world. What we have described above is the ideal self that celebrities were able to proffer and ultimately led to their capacity to effectively sell a wide variety of products. This reading of celebrity identifies only a partial story of how celebrities taught the world. The narratives of divorce, of drunkenness, of aspects of personal lawlessness, of violence, of affairs and of misbehaving offspring, among many other stories, served to articulate a different public sphere than that constructed through the official histories of a culture. Implied in the celebrity discourse of gossip was an interpersonal dimension – what was often defined in newspaper coverage as the human feature – of the organisation of our culture. Gossip, in particular, circulated around celebrities as an explanation of personality that went beyond their onscreen personae and moved them into a public ‘community’ of recognisable figures who revealed at least part of their private experiences to heighten the affective connection to an audience.

Gossip has been studied from a number of perspectives. On one level, gossip has represented a form of social cohesion, a means by which group membership is enacted, reclaimed, and produced forms of exclusion (Gluckman 1963). De Backer, for instance, divides gossip into two functions: reputation gossip, where the status of a person is redrawn based on the information circulated in a community, and strategy learning gossip, where one learns social cues and preferred behaviour through the information gleaned about others (2005, in de Backer et al. 2007, p. 335). Other studies have focused upon how, among adolescents in particular, there is a form of reinforcement within a group of attitudes through gossip exchanges (Eder and Enke 1991). One of the key features of gossip as a discourse is that it is a structure of speech engagement or conversation that speaks about others specifically when they are not present.

This non-presence of the object of the gossip has actually made celebrity gossip perhaps one of the easiest and readily available forms of gossip. In the studies of celebrity gossip, researchers of 1970s’ and 1980s’ American tabloid gossip refer to the way in which it helps to produce social order in the populace through its representations of the problems and unhappiness of the rich and famous, despite their wealth and the adulation they attract from others.
(Levin et al. 1998). The use of celebrity gossip, then, is an extension of the uses of gossip in a community as a form of social control. Celebrity gossip, however, slips the yoke of the local and has often allowed debates to move seamlessly into a national or in some cases international debate while at the same time dealing with issues related to intimacy, family, and what has been regarded as the personal and private realm. What has to be understood about celebrity gossip throughout the twentieth century is that it has operated on two levels:

- first, there has been the reportage that has appeared as a form of information for readers in tabloids, newspapers, television programmes and magazines—in other words, it is structured and highly mediated; and
- secondly, there has been the deployment of celebrity gossip through personal conversation and evaluation that constantly moves the highly mediated into the interpersonal dimensions of everyday interchange. The movement of this kind of celebrity gossip information into the interpersonal is accentuated precisely because of the often personal nature of the information presented about celebrities.

Celebrity gossip is one of the principal components of an elaborate celebrity discourse that continued and intensified for most of the last century. It was a discourse that spanned from the official and the sanctioned to the transgressive and the titillating, with many layers and levels of revelation between these two ends of the spectrum of what constituted the public self of the celebrity. Critically, it was used by an audience to make sense of the intersection of their public and private worlds and how that intersection related to the production of the self. De Backer et al. have identified how celebrity gossip can operate for younger people as a form of social learning—in other words, as a way to work out how they should dress, act and engage (De Backer et al. 2007, pp. 345–346). Their study also revealed that with older adults, celebrities were used in what can be called parasocial activities: the celebrity is integrated as if they are part of a social network for conversation purposes, but their parasociality means that this integration into the interpersonal is entirely one way, where the celebrity is obviously not truly part of the social network, but only in a mediated form (De Backer et al. 2007, pp. 340, 347–348).

On the surface, to understand the continued resonance and value of celebrity discourse in a changed media culture appears difficult. After all, celebrities are a production of the self specifically dependent upon a very elaborate and powerful media culture. They are elemental components of representational culture (Marshall 2006, pp. 636–637). With their dependence upon television, film, radio and the press for their influence even at this parasocial level, it would appear that the dispersal quality of on-line culture and its transformation of the power of traditional media to represent and embody interests and desires, celebrity as a moniker of identity, individuality and the consumer self may also be waning. However, what can be identified in this century-long discourse are some specific elements which are incredibly valuable to the emergence of on-line culture. I will highlight each of these elements and then explain how they are elemental to the production of the on-line self. In order to unpack the production of the on-line self and how it is informed by celebrity culture, I am going to use the way that particular celebrities are presenting themselves in this era of presentational culture to, in a very real sense, re-present and reconstruct themselves with the benefit of this continued negotiation of the self that celebrity culture has articulated, leading up to the emergence of on-line culture and identity.

**The Technological and Cultural Change: Social Networks to Presentational Media**

Some of the key changes in the way that we find, explore and share entertainment and information have produced this shifted constitution of our culture. It is not that television and film as examples of representational media do not continue to produce quite profound structure for our culture; it is more accurate to say that that influence is just less profound and less relentlessly omnipresent and perhaps more remediﬁed through on-line pathways. Key changes have happened relatively recently. In the last half-decade, internet usage in all its manifestations is now...