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The Iconicity of Celebrity and the Spiritual Impulse

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Abstract

Celebrity has a powerful material presence in contemporary consumer culture but its surface aesthetic resonates with the promise of deeper meanings. This *Marketplace Icons* contribution speculates on the iconicity of celebrity from a spiritual perspective. The social value or authenticity of contemporary celebrity, and the social processes through which it emerges, are matters of debate amongst researchers and competing approaches include field theory, functionalism, and anthropologically inflected accounts of the latent need for ritual, myth and spiritual fulfillment evinced by celebrity 'worship'. We focus on the latter area as a partial explanation of the phenomenon whereby so many consumers seem so enchanted by images of, and stories about, individuals with whom they, or we, often have little in common. We speculate that the powerful presence of celebrity in Western consumer culture to some extent reflects and exploits a latent need for myths of redemption through the iconic character of many, though by no means all, manifestations of celebrity consumption.

Tom Jones 'can't sing'

When the first author was growing up in the 1960s, his parents would mock his older siblings' entertainment heroes. Celebrities, you see, just weren't what they used to be. To his unsophisticated ears the vinyl recordings of Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding, Tom Jones or Mick Jagger emanating from the family's huge wooden radiogram sounded pretty good. According to Mum and Dad, though, these cutting edge performers of the time couldn't even sing. Many popular artists of the time were later

to be almost deified by fans and critics alike and, in the case of Jones and Jagger, knighted by Her Majesty The Queen for services to popular music. But, allegedly, these talentless warblers bore no comparison to true greats such as Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, and even Mario Lanza. Similarly, the hip new movie stars such as Dustin Hoffman and Clint Eastwood apparently lacked the charisma and style of the movie greats of earlier decades, like Clark Gable, Ava Gardner, or Myrna Loy. Even star footballers of the time like Pele and Georgie Best couldn't hold a candle to the true greats, Stanley Matthews and Ferenc Puskás, at least according to Dad. All in all, for the older generation, celebrity hyperinflation meant that one Bing Crosby was worth perhaps fifty Tom Joneses.

It is a familiar inter-generational argument that entertainment celebrity was justly earned in earlier times, supposedly, but in modern times is bestowed willy-nilly on the flavour-of-the-week, the ever-so-slightly talented, or the downright fraudulent. It is ascribed, if you will, to the undeserving by the undiscerning, rather than earned by a general consensus of cognoscenti (Boorstin, 1992). Many doyens of contemporary stage, screen, sport, literature, politics and the other proliferating domains in which prominent individuals now become celebrated (Gamson, 1994) would cavil at the suggestion that their own renown is anything less than hard-earned and thoroughly deserved. Nonetheless, the suspicion remains that many contemporary celebrities are produced and supplied to order by media institutions (Rojek, 2012) in response to a voracious but quirky and uncritical market.

Perhaps it is surprising, then, that first-rate academic theorists treat celebrity as a serious topic of social study. Granted, for some, perspectives such as those offered by Boorstin (1992) or Alexander (2010) are inflected with an elitist bewilderment at the puzzling enthusiasms of the hoy polloy or, at worst, are dismissive of a cynically orchestrated mass consciousness which, if not necessarily false, is certainly not enlightened (Hesmondhalgh, 2005). Without doubt, many consumers who are neither deluded nor ill-informed take their relationships, or quasi-relationships, with celebrities deeply seriously and regard them as central to their emotional lives and identities. For some theorists, this role can be seen as part of a broader function, perhaps addressing a latent need for religious experience (Alexander, 2010) or to

fulfill a cultural purpose in resolving ideological dilemmas (Holt, 2004). For other theorists, functional explanations of the rise of celebrity as a cultural phenomenon overstate the symmetry of social relations and, instead, see celebrity as a source of power through the acquisition of cultural capital (Thompson et al., 2015; Marshall, 2014; Couldry, 2015). Still others focus on the function of celebrity as a driver of economic activity (Turner, 2004) and point to the necessity for marketing institutions to ratchet up celebrity supply in response to the seemingly insatiable demand (Hackley and Hackley, 2015). As a counterpoint to structural explanations of the cultural production of celebrity, an element of democratization (Driessens, 2013) needs to be accounted for, whereby individuals can access and exploit the media resources to elect and create celebrities: in some cases, themselves.

In this paper, we assume that the different theoretical perspectives on celebrity need not be mutually exclusive and, rather, offer partial explanations of a phenomenon that has many differing manifestations. In this spirit we speculate on the parallels between celebrities and religious icons, evinced in the oft-used metaphor celebrity ‘worship’. These parallels have been noted, not least by Barthes (1957) in his lyrical paean to the divinity of Greta Garbo’s face on the silver screen, which articulated a sense that the celebrity sign’s surface aesthetic carries a deeper denotation, one that is iconic in a spiritual sense. More recently, Alexander (2010) has referred to the same phenomenon, also focusing on a major movie star rather than on celebrities from less glamorous domains. Celebrities are part of the everyday lives of millions of people to whom their admiration seems rational and nuanced. But could it possibly be that, even as the sheen of celebrity glows a little less brightly for each generation, celebrities still retain the power to save us (Wohlfeil and Whelan, 2012)?

In the foregoing, we reject neither the putatively ‘elitist’ view of celebrity that its rise in consumer culture corresponds to a decline in basic common sense, nor the more inclusive view that it is a sociologically important subject of academic study. Indeed, we see no contradiction in a perspective that embraces both. The idea that one might hold a person of little virtue, accomplishment or charm in high regard is hardly elitist, yet cultural analyses that draw attention to the apparent lack of rare quality in many celebrated individuals are sometimes accused of being just that. We see celebrity as

an important sociological and cultural phenomenon that is often amusingly odd or cynically exploitative in its manifestations, and may well be, at times, a rather negative influence for some, even though others see their particular idols as a genuine inspiration. Finally, as our use of the term ‘idol’ above implies, we see celebrity as a cultural resource that can be both sacred and profane (Garbo being an example, who, though divine, mocked sexual mores of the time) depending on the context and the reader, and no less spiritually inflected for that. Contradictory though this may be, we explore the idea of celebrity worship as an excessive consumption practice partly underpinned by a spiritual impulse (Bataille, 1991) and articulated through myth.

Our discussion will sometimes make use of the categories of icon, celebrity and myth with less than technical precision. For some researchers, a trajectory can be discerned that leads some individuals from anonymity toward the status of celebrity (Rojek, 2012), perhaps driven by media interest in their private lives (Marshall, 2014) and onwards, from celebrity to icon (Eagar and Lindridge, 2014). No doubt such process analyses can be revealing in particular cases, and we agree that not all celebrities can be designated as iconic, and by no means all forms of celebrity consumption can be explained by recourse to myth. Rather, in this piece we aim to reflect on the possible foundational motivations underlying the powerful and enduring interest in stories and visual representations of celebrated individuals in Western consumer culture. We suggest that the categories myths, icons and celebrities are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and that some examples of celebrity exhibit features of both myth and iconicity (Alexander, 2010). But, to return to our initial question, what is it that so many people find so compelling about someone they’ve never met who just happens to be featured in the media?

Celebrities as icons with a spiritual dimension

Holt (2004), as noted above, refers to the iconic status of a select few celebrities and brands that mobilize myths and resolve cultural contradictions. Alexander (2010), in contrast, emphasizes the religious connotations that are invoked in discourse around iconic celebrities, such as Audrey Hepburn. For Alexander (2010), celebrants’ accounts of their engagement with celebrity (visiting Elvis Presley’s former home, Graceland; shaking President Barack Obama’s hand; modeling Hepburn’s Little

Black Dress (the notorious LBD) at Tiffany's) can be understood as an introjection process in which "the celebrity-icon actually becomes part of their internal self" (p.325). The celebrants' desire to introject the celebrity might reflect a narcissistic impulse, but it is a spiritual narcissism inherent in the Judeo/Islamic/Christian religious tradition of individual salvation through communion with God. This may be ropey theology, but it seems that individuals can be saved, by realizing their true identity in God's image. Note that we do not suggest that this be taken too literally- in Christian theology Mankind is cast in the image of God, and the saints who typically populate iconic representations are said to be God-like in their spiritual purity, though to a degree far beyond that to which most run-of-the-mill sinners can aspire. In turn, they occupy a spiritual realm infinitely far below God Himself. The monotheistic origins of iconicity do not preclude consumers from consuming many celebrities, and nor do they necessarily imply that consumers are 'worshipping' themselves or others as Gods. Rather, we speculate that that celebrity culture reflects the decline in the West of a means of connection with myth and spirituality through ritual. What remains is a latent and unarticulated need that celebrity culture expresses and fulfills, at least for some.

The frequent use of religious metaphors such as 'worship', 'icon', 'adore' and 'divine' in connection with celebrity seems telling. In the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ declares his iconicity, saying that 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). Christ is the image of a human creature, but also the likeness of God. Religious iconography reflects a Christological ontology (Baker, 2011), counter to Enlightenment notions of individuality and identity. Identity is given in likeness to God, not constructed by material forces. In the theological perspective, human beings are located in the holy economy amongst religious icons, as (pale) likenesses of holiness. When we gaze upon the celebrity form (an image of the resoundingly Christ-like David Beckham comes to mind here, clad only in a pure white Calvin Klein loin cloth) we are introjecting a sense of our sacred selves, and expressing a sense that we are more than we appear to be. The surface aesthetic of the celebrity is not all that we consume when we witness the sacrality of the celebrated by acknowledging their presence in our lives. We are also consuming a rich stock of second order meanings and myths that have a spiritual resonance.

Getting *Closer!* - to the Divine

This fanciful notion is hard to entertain, admittedly, as our well-thumbed copy of ‘*Closer!*’ celebrity magazine lies on the couch. The celebrity magazine is one of the few popular print genres still economically viable as younger consumers abandon print in favour of free-to-access celebrity-driven mobile infotainment. The magazine carries the less-than-divine, cosmetically altered countenance of a currently out-of-work model/actress/singer dispensing dietary advice, her qualification being her BMI, which seems to fluctuate by the hour. Another story relates the relationship problems of someone who has generated an impressive revenue stream from humping and dumping reality TV stars, and selling the PR stories. We learn of the single mum of 12 living the high life on state benefits, and negotiating her own reality TV show. It might be a daily cultural reference point for some, but it’s all a far cry from the divine Garbo, or the incomparable Holly Golightly in her richly signifying LBD.

The iconoclastic modern intellectual recoils from such a fantastical notion as iconic celebrity, and instead cites theorists such as Rojek (2012) to categorize celebrity in terms of values ascribed to it by an impressionable public under the influence of a sophisticated media machine. Celebrity, for the moderns, is an economic construction and a cultural conceit, rather than a social fact. If one looks closely, and critically, the sequins and silk of celebrity’s LBD fall away, revealing its crude and decidedly man-made fabric. Since Daniel Boorstin (1992) noted the rise of the personage who becomes known simply for being known, well-known-ness has become democratized (Driessens, 2013) as never before and the celetooid (Rojek, 2012), the personage who wins fame from reality TV (Thompson et al., 2015) or serendipitous news coverage rather than because of any outstanding talent or industry, has become a familiar sight on our TV screens and *Twitter* feeds. The pace of production of these cultural chimeras seems to have accelerated to the extent that one must strongly suspect that media institutions and marketers have a deeply vested interest (Hesmondhalgh 2005).

Celebrity democratized

Of course, the economic uses of celebrity have been evident to marketers with a flair for communication ever since print enabled the picture-led story. That legendary purveyor of sensational spectacle (at a price), P.T. Barnum, was adroit at using the

press to elevate mediocrities into stars with his unique brand of hokum long before Simon Cowell industrialized the process with his reality-based TV talent show formats (Brown and Hackley, 2012; Hackley, Brown and Hackley, 2012). The age of media convergence (Jenkins, 2008) has truly seen the disintermediation of the fame game. Now, anyone can play. Hollywood studios, news agencies, journalists, artists' management agencies and Public Relations outfits still wield great power, but these cultural institutions are often mere administrators to a perpetual plebiscite in which a billion votes a second are cast via shared memes, *Tweets*, Likes, views and comments for the latest reality star, blogger, vlogger, news anti-hero or *Vine* star (Hackley and Hackley, 2015). The process of celebrification, the means by which individuals are elevated to public prominence (not to be confused with the broader celebritization of culture: Rojek, 2012) can be seen as an economically-driven artifice facilitated by media institutions that promote celebrities to a position of very public intimacy by covering their private lives and personal peccadilloes (Marshall, 2014). But, process analyses, while necessary, are far from sufficient to a comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon of celebrity and its powerful presence in contemporary consumer culture.

The idiom of celebrity has become so thoroughly normalized in our media-saturated lives that it has reached back into non-celebrity culture. Not only is any self-respecting artist today thoroughly au fait with the techniques of self-branding (Schroeder, 2005a), but even pathetic nonentities like you and I post our fatuous statuses and boring selfies on *Facebook*, as if the minutiae of our lives are somehow sanctified by performing them on-screen to a potential audience of billions. "OMG, so-and-so's changed his profile picture again- Jeezus, what a narcissist- Oh, here comes dinner- that'll make a lovely *Instagram* to my 6 followers". In the virtual world of social media, we are all celebrities. Our joys, despairs, pronouncements on affairs of state and style choices are played out to the public gaze. The gaze might be averted at the moment we post, but the audience is there.

The divine absurdity of celebrity culture

It is easy, and no doubt sensible, to deplore the vanity, the superficiality, the economic instrumentalism, the absurdity of celebrity culture. For Alexander (2010), it

is also misleading: there is something else afoot. Celebrity obsession may be morally and intellectually deplorable, at least in some of its more extreme manifestations, but it seems to serve purposes that are neither risible nor trivial. Perhaps living in our scientific yet alienating world we have developed an oversensitized need for mythic heroes, and the dialectical paradox theorized by Horkheimer and Adorno (2002) is played out in a consumer circus of celebrity worship.

Contemporary celebrities are mooted as icons of beauty and kindness (Princess Diana) innocence (press images of kidnapped child Madeleine McCann), heroism and masculinity (movie stars or sporting heroes such as David Beckham), or of evil (images of deceased UK entertainer Jimmy Savile are often seen now in press reports of child abuse, and monstrosity (The Elephant Man, David Merrick). That Man Beckham is human like us, a father and a husband, but he is a myth realized, his heroic status reinforced by the sheer ordinariness of this plumber's son from East London. To gaze upon his image in an advertisement is to experience a moment of ecstasy, that such a man walks amongst us. We can relive and materialize the ecstasy by consuming our desire, for his heroic status, his money, his looks, his watch, or his pants. Beckham evokes traditional mythic heroism, but he is also a type 2 myth, since many of us know his persona to be false: he may be a thoroughly nice and deucedly handsome chap, but he was not in the first rank of football greats, and his public persona is carefully coached and crafted.

Contemporary mediated celebrity contains elements that undermine and also reflect theological iconic celebrity. For example, both versions of iconic celebrity, the Christological and the industrial, are 'witnessed' by celebrants (Baker, 2011). Both reflect the interplay of the sacred and the profane, as in the theological transgression of idol worship, to which accusation celebrants become vulnerable if the signifier floats free from its signified. Aspects of totemism can be noted both in religious iconography and in celebrity culture, while attacks on celebrity culture can be seen to resemble iconoclastic criticisms of idol worship (Alexander, 2010). Both the theological and the industrial conceptions of celebrity are important to the sense of identity of the celebrant. The celebration of iconic celebrity, which might entail ritual practices as divergent and as incompatible as public worship, or clicking on a mobile

device to share a social media story, is an act of social identification reflecting shared cultural experience which locates and binds the celebrant within a cultural economy of the sign.

For Barthes (1957) the technologies of modernity materialize myths, and obscure their origins. Traditional stories of human heroes and supernatural beings are transposed into modern technological and narrative forms. Audiences with little or no classical or religious education clearly have a huge appetite for dramatic entertainment that features mythical monsters, supernatural heroes or superhuman characters, judging by the proliferation of mythical storylines in movies, TV dramas, books and computer games such as *Game of Thrones*, *Thor*, *Superman*, *The Hobbit* and many more. In a convergent media era (Jenkins, 2008) media genres are no longer clearly demarcated and enter consciousness as a barely differentiated stream of images and storylines. The visual economy (Schroeder, 2005b) in the convergence era is accessed through a screen, and it needs its celebrities to give visual resonance and market definition to images of consumption. The parallels with iconic representations of earlier times seem compelling, at least to us. Icons link us to myths of eternity, and redemption, and these myths give celebrity culture its emotive force. Kleos, the Greek notion of fame or renown, was sought by men to grasp at immortality. The impulse to witness immortality remains, and we seek our myths where we can find them. Now, where's that copy of *Closer!* magazine?

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