Celebrity, media and history

Chapter 1

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1 Some perspectives on 'celebrity culture'

It seems that a significant amount of the media information we use to learn about the world involves celebrities. Moreover, it is often said that we live in a culture that is uniquely – unlike past cultures – dominated by celebrities.

Activity 1.1

Look at Plate 1 in the colour section. Observe all the elements assembled to constitute this image, including lighting, pose, facial expression, camera angle and composition. What kind of man do you think this is?

Now look at Plate 9 in the colour section. This is the front cover of an issue of the US weekly magazine, *Newsweek* from 1995. Have your views about the man in Plate 1 changed? How does the front cover of this magazine represent (portray) this man? You might want to look at Plate 10 too.

Newsweek is a US mass circulation magazine. The entire front cover of this issue is taken up by a picture of a man whom you may recognise without the help of the headlines in Plate 9. It is Timothy McVeigh, who was executed for the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal building in April 1995 that killed 167 people. What is interesting about this cover and the story it relates (set out in Plate 10 – do not bother trying to read the text of the article unless you want to, simply look at the layout) is that, through them, McVeigh has been subjected to a process of *celebritisation* (see Gabler in Sturken, 2001). Of course, he was already well known nationally and internationally, because there was inevitably great interest in the crime for which he was responsible. In using the term 'celebritisation', however, we refer to something else: the fact that *Newsweek* has used various 'devices' to portray McVeigh as a personality, a distinctive individual, even a glamorous person. The visual and verbal elements that create meaning in this photograph of McVeigh – the pose, lighting, camera angle, composition, facial expression, headlines and written copy – are all particular textual devices. They have been selected and combined together to convey a particular meaning. If other kinds of lighting or a different pose, another caption, had been used instead, the effect (the overall meaning) could have been quite different. These textual devices (which are discussed further in Chapter 2) do the work of shaping the meaning of events or people, directing readers and viewers to make sense of these events in one way rather than another.

Celebritisation, then, is the process in which someone is turned into a celebrity, or to put it more strongly, the process in which celebrity is fabricated. This, I will argue in this chapter, is a process of considerable

social and even political significance. In the case of McVeigh, by using various devices, viewers are encouraged to feel an intimacy with him. Indeed, he could almost be mistaken for a film star. We look at him in close-up, as if we are peering into his soul; he stares into the distance with a penetrating look as if in profound thought. This is not the police mug-shot usually deployed for criminal suspects; rather, with its subtle tonal range and attention to facial features, this cover obeys the portrait conventions that flatter a subject. When you turned to Plate 9, did you find that the headline 'The suspect speaks' jarred with this 'positive' image of McVeigh. Without this headline it is highly unlikely you would have realised that McVeigh was a criminal suspect unless, of course, you had already recognised him. In the triplet of images in Plate 10 McVeigh is asked to pose by the photographer and larks about, trying on different poses. The journalist tells us that McVeigh was actually photographed inside the El Reno Federal Correctional Institution – but for the purposes of the photograph he is placed in a new context. It is as if the prison has been turned into a photographer's studio! This seems likely to persuade us to think of McVeigh as less like a mere criminal and more like an interesting person, even a celebrity, in his own right. On the inside pages, there is a detailed interview with McVeigh, who speaks about his parents' divorce, his childhood, girlfriends and his life in the army. He comes across overwhelmingly as a 'normal' all-American boy who had a love for his country and did a spell in the US military as a way of 'discovering' himself (*Newsweek*, 1995, p.27).

The importance placed on every utterance by McVeigh in the accompanying article and the overall amplification of his personality, through the textual devices discussed earlier, is typical of the way in which individuals are portrayed as celebrities. Thus, McVeigh is made to appear as a unique individual with distinctive qualities and personal history. One possible reason for the celebritisation of McVeigh is that he was an ex-army man, young and white, and a patriot (Sanchez in Sturken, 2001). In the *Newsweek* story, his earlier experiences of patriotic army service and military action abroad are seen as an almost natural preparation for the act he committed in Oklahoma. The overall impression given by the article is that he is one of America's 'sons' who took an accidental turning in life (Gabler in Sturken, 2001). At the least, it appears that this article is ambivalent about McVeigh's status as a terrorist and in some ways portrays him as a hero, or at least as someone who deserves respect. Perhaps this is a measure of the extent to which the *Newsweek* organisation – whether we understand this as its journalists' or proprietor's views or its presumption about its readership (see Chapter 3) – *identifies* with this young American man. That is, unlike other terrorists, such as Islamic fundamentalists, whom the US now and probably for the foreseeable future regard as criminals, McVeigh is

treated as someone that US readers are expected to relate to, recognise as one of their own and even empathise with.

This example shows how celebrity coverage in the media actually works as a set of textual devices that convey symbolic meaning, and you will study this in greater detail in Chapter 2. It is a powerful example of how the media portrayal and *construction* of celebrities shape the way in which audiences understand and make sense of the social world. McVeigh is used as a 'peg' to articulate social values and beliefs that may be implicit and unquestioned. It also shows that the celebritisation process is not as superficial as some proclaim it to be (Boorstin, 1961; see Book Introduction). So, an analysis such as this of celebritisation (the media's manufacture of celebrities) is important in and of itself, and much of this book is devoted to this task. However, some cultural and media theorists use examples of celebritisation to argue for a more significant trend – the *increased prominence* of celebrity in our culture as a whole (Turner et al., 2000; Corner and Pels, 2003; Marshall, 1997). Indeed, they might say that our example of McVeigh is typical of a new cultural shift in which even the most unlikely and inappropriate subjects – criminals – are turned into celebrities and that this is surely a sign of the expansion of celebrity coverage in general. The idea that celebrities dominate contemporary life in new and unprecedented ways is found in the two main perspectives – populist democracy and cultural decline – that I would now like to introduce. Both these perspectives support the idea that celebrity culture is a contemporary or recent phenomenon, but they have rather different approaches to it.

1.1 Celebrity as populist democracy

A number of critics take the view that celebrity culture represents a process of social levelling (Gray, 2002; Cowen, 2000; see also Garratt, 2002; Liddiment, 2003; Frank, 2002) (see Figure 1.1). For them, celebrity culture is the natural end-point of a long process of democratisation and the development of a capitalist market society. They argue that the commercial exploitation of a range of media technologies – the buying and selling of media products in a market – has led to an ever-widening accessibility of these products to the population as a whole (see Hartley, 1996; Thompson, 1995).

Apologists for an unfettered market say it allows audiences themselves to determine who can become celebrities. For example, they argue that in 'reality television' programmes such as *Big Brother* (Channel 4) or *Pop Idol* (ITV), we, the public, are made directly responsible for expressing our preferences by having the power to decide on the winner through our (phone) votes. New electronic media are seen as breakthrough technologies in further enabling a 'DIY' celebrity culture. The internet, for example, has been lauded for widening the pool of potential

celebrities by allowing would-be celebrities to sidestep the normal centralised channels of the media industry. It is said to lower the entry barriers, making it far easier – because it is cheaper and faster – to interact with (aspiring) celebrities, creating (and then destroying) them through email chat (Gamson, 2000; see MacManus, 2004). This has increased the number of opportunities for ordinary people to have their '15 minutes of fame', as Andy Warhol once said. Today's 'overnight' celebrities – fashionable today but gone tomorrow – are positive proof of this.

For the populists, fame is part of a western ideal of personal freedom. Today's celebrity culture is based on rewarding self-improvement and efforts towards self-development, rather than being a consequence of hierarchical privilege and elite networks. Celebrity is a positive force for the good because it represents the power of the individual based on characteristics that are unique to that person alone; it therefore represents equality. Accordingly, it is said that each celebrity today has something that is distinctively 'theirs' – you do not even need talent, but simply recognition for what you 'are'. Essentially, you are famous for yourself. For example, celebrity 'wannabes' who take part in television talent shows such as ITV's *Pop Idol* make a virtue of their weaknesses and reinvent their identities, finding a distinctive image that defines them as unique and different from others – on *Pop Idol*, a stammer or being overweight were examples of this (see Garratt, 2002; Braudy, 1997). Hence, fame typifies a particular idea of personal freedom and motivation to succeed that all should share. This view is most frequently expressed by media proprietors, journalists or editors who want to defend their interests in publishing stories about celebrities.

Figure 1.1 *'Posh and Becks' cartoon, 1999. This cartoon refers to the wedding of Victoria Adams (ex-member of the Spice Girls pop band) to David Beckham (ex-Manchester United and England football player). 'Posh and Becks', regarded as occupying the ranks of the nouveau riche, were at the time widely referred to as the New Royals, and their mansion was jokily renamed 'Beckingham Palace' in the popular press. The cartoon makes reference to the pictures the Beckhams sold to* OK! *magazine of their wedding, which was regal and English-historical – a coat of arms, liveried attendants, gold thrones for bride and groom, a crown for the bride, and the use of Princess Diana's jewellers. The* Daily Mirror *reported it as 'the people's royal wedding'*

1.2 Celebrity as cultural decline

Some theorists, critical of the kinds of values represented by celebrity in recent years, hold that celebrity represents a cultural decline, a lapse from an earlier age when fame had a scarcity value (Boorstin, 1961; Walker, 1970; Schickel, 1985; Gitlin, 1998; Postman, 1985; South, 2000). According to Daniel Boorstin (1961), for example, the category of celebrity has widened so much that fame is not an attribution that reflects any real achievement or skill, but rather

the success expressed in celebrity is 'success without the requisite association with work' (Marshall, 1997, p.ix). Nowadays, he argues, public recognition is valued for its own sake. Boorstin assumes that at some point in the past fame was legendary and noble, a referential yardstick for virtuous deeds, integrity or honour. It embodied nobler and higher values, such as great thoughts and ideals or services for the higher good. For Boorstin, today's celebrities suffer from narcissistic self-obsession. They stand for a culture where instant gratification is preferred over more long-term rewards and where surface image is valued more than the substance underneath (Postman, 1985; South, 2000). Other theorists point to the erosion of the boundaries that allowed different values to be attached to different social and institutional spheres. These spheres – such as the public and the private, high art and commercial culture, news and entertainment – have become merged and they have come to share the same values and norms of behaviour (Sennett, 1977; Lash, 1990). Politicians are celebritised when the media erode the boundaries between public and private life, obsessively pursuing information about their private lives (such as their sexual relationships and personal views) even if irrelevant to their public role (Corner and Pels, 2003). Moreover, celebrities themselves have real power when their publicists, public relations strategists and agents can exert control over the content of newspapers and magazines (Wells and Twist, 2002; South, 2000; see Turner et al., 2000; see the discussion in Chapter 3, Section 2).

You may have noticed that these two perspectives attach different *values* to celebrity culture: put simply, the first is 'for' and the second is 'against'. But they also share two assumptions. First, celebrity becomes a metaphor for the contemporary condition of society as a whole, whether this condition is one of decline or popular self-expression. Thus, 'celebrity culture' is regarded as expressing a Zeitgeist (from the German 'spirit of the times'). The second assumption is that celebrity has an increased cultural significance today, linked to new cultural values (whether these be increased equality or a decline in standards) that were not present in previous periods.

In this chapter we shall assess the relationship between the media and celebrity over time. One aim is to question the idea that the interest in celebrity and the widespread circulation of celebrities is as definitive of our times, or as new as is claimed. As we will see, change often happens in a small-scale, piecemeal fashion, so that elements of the 'old' are reformulated and combined with new developments.

So we cannot just assume that celebrity is more important or different now than at earlier moments. We need to investigate the *link* between changes in the media and changes in celebrity over time. It is important, therefore, to attend to the individual circumstances of each celebrity phenomenon and understand the meaning of celebrity within the context

of its historical moment. Another aim of this chapter is to contrast the populist and cultural decline perspectives of celebrity culture. We will see that each offers a story, but not the whole story, of the meaning of celebrity.

Section 2 introduces a working definition of celebrity as 'mediated persona' in order to emphasise that celebrity is dependent on the media for its existence. We establish that mediation has always been a key aspect of celebrity and that there are significant continuities between past and present representations of celebrity. Section 3 is a case study of an important historical period, 1890 to 1930, in which the mass media (photography, the press and film) created important new ideas about stars. The research used in the section provides a historically nuanced account. It shows how elements of celebrity culture with which we are familiar now, and that are often regarded as recent phenomena, were becoming commonplace a hundred years ago – such as the interest in the private lives of public people. Having considered some of the connections between fame and stardom in the past and today's celebrity culture, Section 4 discusses whether the power and influence of the celebrity system are different and more intense today. It takes the case of mediated celebrity and modern politics, questioning whether politics is becoming fundamentally altered by celebrity culture. We apply the two perspectives we have just outlined – popular democracy (hereafter called the populist perspective) and the cultural decline perspective – in order to assess the strengths and weaknesses of their interpretations of celebrity politics.

2 Celebrity as mediated persona

2.1 What is mediated persona?

> Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. I want to be Cary Grant.
>
> Cary Grant, quoted in McCann, 1996, p.6

What is a celebrity? Celebrities are, of course, *meant* to be remarkable people, who have charismatic appeal and extraordinary qualities – we refer to someone as 'a celebrity' as if that is *essentially* what they are. Think of the metaphor of 'star' – we speak of people who emanate a bright and powerful light. The German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) described charisma as one type of social authority and defined the charismatic individual as 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least superficially exceptional qualities' (in Dyer, 1979, p.35). But, does this power really

emanate from the individual star or celebrity him- or herself? Is the appeal of a celebrity a *consequence* of his or her innate qualities? Is it the living person behind the image whom we see in our magazines and on our television screens who is charismatic? Or is it their image, that later we term 'mediated persona', which makes them seem charismatic?

Activity 1.2

Re-read the quotation at the beginning of the section, taken from a biography of the film star Cary Grant. Make a brief note of what you think this quotation means. ■■■

In the quotation, Grant seems to imply that a fabrication, albeit one supposedly based on him, is in public circulation. He appears bemused to find that 'Cary Grant' has become an entity unobtainable even to him, almost as if he had nothing to do with it! He can only aspire to achieving Cary Grant-*ness*, since 'his' public character has become a representation stitched together from a number of colourful texts that circulate quite independently of the real, living person called Cary Grant. Again, Grant himself summed up the problem, after his failed marriage to Barbara Hutton, saying that 'She thought that she was marrying Cary Grant'. It probably did not help that even his name was manufactured – in common with many other entertainment stars since the nineteenth century – underlining the fictional basis of his public identity. Grant's birth name, Archibald Leach, was considered by Paramount Studios to be an impediment to a successful film career.

These representations may share a similarity of physical attributes with the material person of Grant, but they are not attributes of him and should not be confused *with* him. If Cary Grant had trouble finding himself among the representations of himself, the attachment of audience members to celebrities can also involve misunderstandings. Entertainment celebrities report that fans write to them commonly confusing them with the characters they play. For images, accompanied by a gossipy style of journalism, can make public people feel very familiar to us. They are endlessly repeated and invade the private spaces of our homes through the mass media. We can easily come to believe that we 'know' the people in these images, perhaps even better than people we spend time with. For some, this impression of intimacy is taken a step further. Some spectators and listeners have passionate love/hate relationships with celebrities – of which the extreme examples are fans and stalkers – and there are well-documented cases of how destructive these attachments can be (Schickel, 1985). Some stalkers and fans seek to break down more actively the gap between themselves and the object of their adoration in order to control or become them (see Chapter 4).

However, it seems difficult, as Grant implied, to close the gap between celebrity and onlooker, to match the person inside with the public image. This seems to be part of the condition of celebrity: celebrities depend for their status and popularity on a larger group of people who observe them and their image from a distance. It therefore follows that any charisma that celebrities possess must be a consequence of the distance from their audience – a distance achieved through the fact that they only appear as representations in mediated texts, however familiar to their audience they seem to be. As a general category, then, celebrity and its charismatic effect are dependent on the lack of a face-to-face relationship. You may remember from the Book Introduction that one key feature of even the most basic communications media is that they involve 'mediated interaction' – using a technical medium to transmit information or symbolic content to individuals who are separated from each other in space and often in time. If celebrities are the few, known by the many, then people can only become celebrities through the transmission of their image: celebrity *by definition* requires mediation.

Celebrity is, therefore, only available by means of texts that circulate to create an image of that person (see Chapter 2). It is the result of creating an image that is only *loosely* attached to a living individual who carries the burden of it – as Grant was only too aware. We can call this image a celebrity's *mediated persona*. Persona (from the Latin, 'persona' for a mask worn by an actor) is the distinctive image of a person built up from the sum of their mediated appearances. It cannot be reduced to the idiosyncrasies of the real embodied person. Nor is it based solely on what we know of someone from a particular film character they play or other professional performance they put on. It combines elements of each of these to form a 'public presence' (Gledhill, 1991, pp.214–15). Rather than being simply a meaning contained within one individual text, such as one film, persona involves the *circulation* of meanings across different media, different genres and different formats. It may involve aspects of typical roles they play, the image they present in interviews and on chat-shows, celebrity 'inside gossip' and so on. Subsequently, someone's persona can change over time (for further discussion see Chapter 2). Mediated persona is a useful term in that it reminds us how celebrity as a category *is absolutely dependent on the media* to create and disseminate a persona to an audience.

2.2 How new is mediated celebrity? Celebrity, continuity and change

So far we have argued that celebrity persona is dependent on and created through the mediating work of the media – a major theme of this book. But, have fame and celebrity *always* been dependent on the media?

According to Boorstin (see Book Introduction), a cultural decline theorist, the gloomy answer is 'no'. He argues that honour and heroism were at some point in the past recognised for what they truly were, *without* public expression through publicity (see Braudy, 1997, p.9). Therefore, it is the modern mass media that have made fame a desirable end in its own right: 'A celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness' (Boorstin, 1961, p.57).

However, some historians have cast doubt on the idea that there was such a 'golden age' when acknowledgement and publicity for accomplishment in the public realm was regarded as secondary to the accomplishment itself (Braudy, 1997, p.9). They point out, too, that cultural decline theorists never specify when exactly the golden moment in the past was supposed to have occurred. Leo Braudy, a US cultural historian, argues that fame and the deeds it represents have *always depended on* media management. He questions Boorstin's assumption that heroic deeds and their public expression can ever be separated: how would we ever know they were heroic and valid if we didn't get to hear of them?! Braudy (1997, p.9) thinks that moralists like Boorstin have always made great reputations for books denouncing the desire to be recognised, just as today's preachers evangelise about inner, spiritual truths but choose to do this on television! Moreover, Braudy and others have shown extensively how the urge to fame itself, the desire to be singled out from other human beings for special attention, is not new (Braudy, 1997; Burke, 1992). Other societies in the past have disseminated images of special people for admiration, emulation and fear – be they priests, generals, gods, kings, saints or political leaders – when it was quite clear their achievements were not always worthy or selfless.

So, it can be argued that there is much continuity between the representations of the famous in the past and the present (see Figure 1.2), whatever the method of dissemination (such as coins, photographs, monuments and the internet). To take one example, the use of available media by powerful figureheads in earlier societies was similar to the use of today's media by politicians and state leaders, such as the myriad representations of King Louis XIV (1639–1715) (see Figure 1.3). His advisers aimed to project a triumphal image modelled on Alexander the Great. They gave detailed strictures as to how he was to be posed (Burke, 1992). His image was everywhere, inscribed on clocks, ceilings and furnishings, paintings, tapestries, monuments, sculptures, shop signs and cheap pottery plates, many of which have survived. Some media were mechanically reproducible, thus magnifying the King's visibility: prints (such as engravings and woodcuts) could be made in thousands of copies, medals in hundreds (Burke, 1992, p.16). One historian (Burke, 1992) claims that Louis XIV was a master of the staged 'pseudo-event', a

Figure 1.2 *Silver tetradrachm minted by Lysimachus, Greek, 305–281 BC. The earliest known portraits of Alexander the Great are on coins such as these, which were produced during the reign of successors such as Lysimachus in order to cast themselves as his heir. On the front of the coin Alexander is adorned with the ram's horns of Jupiter Ammon, denoting his descent from the Gods*

concept invented by Boorstin to apply to twentieth-century celebrity. What appeared to be spontaneous actions were in fact staged with some care, such as the public rejoicings on the news of French victories.

So there are continuities between the past and present: the media, whether the mass media of the twentieth century or that of the pre-print period, are and always have been essential to celebrity. For, in order to be 'known' by many and talked of at a distance and from afar, one needs a medium of dissemination. And these continuities reach back well before the development of the mass media as we know them today. As we have briefly seen, Louis XIV's period was not devoid of images and representations of the famous, nor was it felt to be at the time. Nor did it lack what we now call 'public relations' or the deliberate attempt to alter the appearance of things (Burke, 1992).

Figure 1.3 *Louis Victorious. Louis at Maastricht by Pierre Mignard, oil on canvas, 1673. Pinacoteca, Turin*

However, there are important differences between past and present too, because different social systems underpin the particular methods of disseminating the images of public figures. Later, we will consider some of the differences between the ways in which monarchs such as Louis XIV and modern-day democratic leaders relate to the media (Section 4.3). However, in general, we can say that under the autocratic political

systems of the pre-modern period, visual representations were almost entirely of the great and the powerful. In the period of monarchical power, the visibility of the powerful few was essential to their position at the top of a social hierarchy. Thus, public appearances were carefully staged, full of pomp and ritual that served to underline the exalted power of the monarch, who was the symbolic and actual centre of the social world. Before the nineteenth century, ordinary people rarely attained public visibility and if they did so it was en masse as a collective entity such as the urban crowd, often regarded in derogatory terms as the 'mob'. But, with the process of industrialisation and the increasing enfranchisement of the populace over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, new elements of the population were made publicly visible. Fame, albeit unevenly, slowly became associated with social mobility rather than with ascribed or inherited social position. For example, in 1831, a bourgeois Parisian proudly exhibited his painted miniature portrait next to that of King Louis Phillippe with the following inscription: 'There is no real difference between Philippe and me: he is a citizen king and I am a kingly citizen!' (Freund, 1980, p.20). Celebrity or fame is no longer associated with the power to kill, tax or enslave, as it was in the time of monarchs such as Louis XIV or Napoleon.

As we pointed out in Section 1, both the cultural decline and populist perspectives share the observation that fame and celebrity have expanded to include many more 'ordinary' people now than in the past. They both agree that today's celebrity is different from that of past cultures, in that it does not now reflect any heroic or rare achievement. But the difference is that cultural decline theorists tend to mourn the loss of the more inaccessible celebrities of the past and the social values they signified, whereas the populists welcome the expansion of the category of celebrity, a contrast that will be discussed further in Section 4.

3 Inventing the twentieth-century celebrity persona

We have established that fame has always been mediated – represented and disseminated by the media of the day. We noted that celebrity culture existed in previous periods, before the advent of today's mass media, but we emphasised that continuities and change co-exist in the history of mediated fame. In this section, we consider a crucial historical period – 1890–1930 – in which the mass media invented a particular kind of 'star' persona (as it was then termed – see the Book Introduction). During this period some of the central devices of celebritisation with which we are familiar today (such as those discussed at the beginning of Section 1.1) were invented. Over a period of three or four decades, these devices