

Fall 2004/Soc 530-640
Media and Culture: American Celebrity
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Fame, like a wayward Girl, will still be coy
 To those who woo her with too slavish knees,
But makes surrender to some thoughtless Boy,
 And dotes the more upon a heart at ease;
She is Gipsy, will no speak to those
 Who have not learnt to be content without her;
A Jilt, whose ear was never whisper'd close,
 Who thinks they scandal her who talk about her;
A very Gipsy is she, Nilus-born,
 Sister-in-law to jealous Potiphar;
Yet love-sick Bards, repay her scorn for scorn,
 Ye Artists lovelorn, madmen that you are!
Make your best bow to her and bid adieu
 Then, if she likes it, she will follow you

John Keats

“If it happens, it happens,” Landon said, “I’m not sitting by the phone,” on stardom possibilities as a result of his participation in “The Real World Philadelphia” (“Farewell Real Philly,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Aug. 24, 2004, D1)

Overview:

Welcome to Sociology 530 “Media and Culture: American Celebrity,” examining the culture of celebrity in the United States and its intersections with mass media. This is not so much about celebrities and we won’t be focusing on celebrities per se—but rather an examination of the how our notions of celebrity interact, and help form, our ideas of national and individual identities. We’ll we looking at some of these questions: What are the antecedents of modern-day celebrity? When did heroes become “celebrities”? What are the essential differences? Is mass media inextricably connected to the production of celebrity or simply the carrier? Given its ability to replicate and enlarge, what is the role of mass media technology in shaping celebrity? What does fandom mean in an advertising-based culture? The companionship of the parasocial relationship? A way to shape identity? A way to have fun? A way to set standards? And how our memory of celebrities play a role in constructing our national memory? These are all questions that we’ll anchor in mass media but ones that cannot ignore other disciplines.

We’ll approach these questions by scholarly and popular readings, including historical and theoretical views offered by sociology and mass media scholars.

For students in the Master of Liberal Arts program, it is hoped that these approaches will draw on the variety of course work you have already undertaken; for sociology graduate students, the course may serve as a bridge to some other disciplines as well as provide us with some broader sociology concepts; and for all others, we look forward to contributions from life experience that—as for all of us—will include connections with the intimate strangers of celebrity.

Books:

The study of celebrity has always had some interest in the general non-fiction press, notably in Daniel Boorstin’s work in the 1970s, Leo Braudy’s work in the 1980s, Joshua Gamson in the 1990s and Jeannette

Walls in 2000, all authors who will read, along with relevant articles. The books that have are now in the Penn Bookstore for the class are Daniel Boorstin, The Image A Guide to Pseudo Events in America. New York: Athenium, 1971 (amazingly, still in print).

Leo Braudy, Frenzy of Renown: fame and its history. Oxford University Press, 1986

Joshua Gansom, Claims to Fame Celebrity Contemporary America. Berkeley: University of California, 1994.

Jeannette Walls, How Gossip Became the News and the News Became Just Another Show, Perennial, 2001.

Class expectations:

As a seminar, class success involves the participation of all in a collegial and democratic manner. You'll be expected to do the readings in a timely manner and to bring to class examples and ideas drawn from the discussion and readings. Class members will also write a formal paper relevant to class topics and may be asked to prepare other presentations during the term that will fit with the topic of the evening.

September 9

Introduction to class:

You'll be receiving this syllabus from the hands of Prof. Andrew Mendelson, one of nation's new academics that has an interest in celebrity. Prof. Mendelson's interest is in the role of paparazzi; rather than outright condemnation of the paparazzi, Prof. Mendelson sees them more as cops on beats, maintaining standards—one of the functions of sensationalism in general (by my account at least). Prof. Mendelson has agreed to present his work in this first session in my absence, (due to an unavoidable conflict schedule--the insistence of family members to choose their own wedding date). His presentation will give you some ideas of what we'll think about this semester. Please feel free to e-mail me in the interim.

Part One: Celebrity and the national mission

September 16 The Roots of Celebrity: The construction of the hero and the ancient world

Here we'll look at the construction of heroism as individual achievement as it was formulated in the time of Alexander and the necessity of history as a "back story" to show off the exploits of the hero.

Read: Braudy, 1-111.

September 23: Celebrity and American leadership. In the many threads that contributed to American revolutionary thinking were the understandings of celebrity as necessary to politics. We'll compare the media construction of fame in terms of the leadership of Franklin and Washington and those implications for leadership.

Read: Braudy, 315-400

Read: "Fame," from Cincinnatus George Washington & the Enlightenment Images of Power in Early America by Garry Wills (supplied)

"Read: "Introduction," Benjamin Franklin The Autobiography and Other Writings, by Kenneth Silverman (supplied).

September 30: Freaks and Heroes: The Common Man Writ Large. *In an age that celebrated the "common man," the expanding mass media of the time was quick to designate multiple heroes while P.T. Barnum expanded common characteristics to their "grotesque" proportions. What are we to make of these two thrusts, occurring coming at a time when technology made replication and extension possible? And is there some connection between the interest in defining image at a time of when the nation is concerned with "the other?"*

Braudy: 491-482

Read: "The American Hero and the Evolution of the Human Interest Story" by Betty Winfield and Janice Hume, American Journalism (spring 1998), 79-99 (Supplied).

"Super Freaks," Philadelphia Inquirer, Aug. 25, 2004, D1,3

Part Two: Impacts of Celebrity in Modern Culture

October 7

Movies Arrive: The Yearning for Metamorphosis

The introduction of movies at a time of great immigration established an audience who wanted to be like what they saw on the screen. How can celebrity affect how we identify ourselves and replace achievement with simply a desire for fame. How can yearning operate in a capitalistic culture? Whom does it serve? What is the meaning of celebrities as “types?” Are parasocial relationships harmful

Walls: 1-150

Read “Producing Identities,” in Grossberg et al, Media Making Mass Media in a Popular Culture by (supplied). (supplied)

October 14. Mass Media and the Marketplace

The expansion of media and the demand for large audiences turned attention a discussion of the role of popular culture in the mass media? An outlet for leisure and a democratic voice,, or, as the critical theorists claimed, a way to maintain “hegemony” over the masses that media could now produce.

Reading, Adorno and Horkheimer: (supplied)

“On Understanding Hegemony Cultural Studies and the Recovery of the Critical,” Hanno Hardt in Critical Communication Studies (supplied)

October 21: Celebrities as News. *From Fatty Arbuckle to the present day, how celebrity stories are told can serve as guide to values, warnings of danger and set personal and national agendas. What are the most common celebrity “frames” What are their messages? How do bad-boy celebrities function? How are they controlled.*

Read: Rex Reed on Barbara Streisand (supplied)

Jeannette Walls, Dish. 150-300.

Read: *Philadelphia Inquirer/National Inquirer*

October 28: Celebrity Power: The Legacy of Ronald Reagan. *The availability of mass media provided celebrity status to voices who otherwise may not have been heard, while allowing celebrities from one venue to be heard as authorities in another. What happens when simply being known is confused with authority based on leadership and proof over time? Is this a democratic way for debate to be extended?.*

Read: Gamson:

November 4 The Manufacture of Celebrity *From the days of Alexander and Caesar, celebrity has not been without manipulation. But Paris Hilton? Jessica Simpson. Can anyone be a celebrity with the right manager.*

Read: Boorstin

November 11: Life After Death: Princess Diana and Other Immortals. *Celebrities may be most powerful in the social memory of the nation. Consider how celebrities are immortalized, .i.e. The Diana Fountain and the monument to Nelson.*

Read Gamson

November 18: Divided and conquered: *Celebrities now exist in all levels of society, from street to screen, and some celebrity names are not recognized in some circles. Has this always been the case, or are we moving into a new definition of celebrity and to what end?*

Read Gamson

THANKSGIVING

December 2 Reading Media Celebrity

Class members will bring in a media product, print or otherwise, and provide a class “reading” according to topics discussed.

December 9 Your Work Here

Members of the class will provide an abstract of their final paper to other class members and provide a formal presentation of about ten minutes each.

FINAL PAPERS ARE DUE MONDAY DEC. 20TH BY 5 P.M.

Final papers can be dropped of at the Sociology department office (in my box) or mailed to me directly my home address.