



# FAME US

CELEBRITY IMPERSONATORS AND THE CULT(URE) OF FAME

BRIAN HOWELL

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*For Charlie and Lucy.*



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## SEEN BY MANY: The Celebrity Image

Norbert Ruebsaat

1.

Celebrity, as we know it today, was created by modern mass media. It began with photography in the early nineteenth century when, for the first time in history, masses of people could regard images of themselves in something other than a mirror. They could regard images of others too, and of things and places they had never seen before, and a new imaginative space opened in which society could compose itself and individuals could locate themselves in a new public world.

There were famous people before photography, but these famous people were seldom seen, and they were not seen by many. Their fame derived from story and legend, orally-transmitted tales and accounts of their deeds; they were not visual creations. Average people saw few images, and those they did see were religious and iconic, never realistic. They saw no pictures of themselves. So when early daguerreotype photographers set up shop and showed them exact replicas not only of themselves but also their loved ones and well-known strangers, they were astonished, sometimes even frightened.

Low-cost daguerreotype photography became popular immediately, and in 1839, Paris newspapers diagnosed a new disease called *daguerreotypomania*. By 1840, daguerreotype studios in Europe and the United States were producing unique, detailed likenesses that could be taken home in hinged leather cases, and a new class

gazed in amazement at its own image in these “mirrors with a memory.” French painter and photographer Adolphe Disdéri in 1854 invented the *carte-de-visite*, a form of photographic calling card, which soon became a new rage. It created an instant market for both celebrity and personal photographs in France and England. Cartes, as they were known, were both traded and collected. They were the first mass photographic medium to generate celebrity value in the modern sense, and their mix of images linked royalty with commoners, actors with audiences, old society with new. Fame suddenly seemed available to all.

When film was invented at the end of the nineteenth century, the imaginative space opened by photography broadened. People imagined themselves not only as images but also as stories, and stories told in film images made one a character. Previous storytelling technologies—first word-of-mouth, then writing and printing—were aural mechanisms, or textual versions of imagined speech. But now, one could “see” oneself, photographically reproduced and realistically portrayed, in the story: one was character, a star in a new narrative universe.

Film as an entertainment medium involving characters began in the early twentieth century. In America, Hollywood studios capitalized on the new form of imaginative storytelling by creating the movie star, a character who plays a succession of roles on public screens, and in the early 1900s, he/she became the vehicle through which audiences identified and insinuated themselves into the new medium. They imagined along with the celluloid text, creating roles also for themselves as “stars,” roles which helped them live in a complicated new world. Silent film actress Florence Lawrence, arguably the world’s first “movie star,” was known as “The Girl of a Thousand Faces,” and in addition to starring in 270 movies, she established the Hollywood tradition of multiple marriages (in her case, three). Mary Pickford

was “America’s Sweetheart,” “Little Mary,” and “the girl with the curls,” and as the star and cofounder of United Artists was one of filmdom’s great pioneers. Known world-wide as a result of moving images, she is considered a watershed figure in the history of modern celebrity.

Movie stars became templates for personal action, reflection, and imagined identity. They were both real and celestial, normal people rendered glamorous by media; people from everyday life who had been discovered (“touched”) by fame: in real life, Marilyn Monroe was Norma Jean Mortenson, John Wayne was Marion Michael Morrison, Rock Hudson was Leroy Harold Scherer, Jr. As a result, “average” people saw themselves personally reflected in these newly famous movie actors. The most successful stars could be you or me. They were a new kind of “Us.”

In order to control their public personae and capitalize on a new commodity, Hollywood film studios worked with agents and managers to construct both on-screen and off-screen images for the early stars. They created public “personalities” that moved in both real and fictional time/space, and brutal tactics were often employed to maintain them: Judy Garland’s legendary drug problems began when MGM fed her uppers to maintain her perky persona and non-stop work schedule; Rock Hudson’s marriage to a woman was arranged in order to fend off rumors of his homosexuality. As actors became famous, packs of tabloid reporters and photographers began chasing them around to gather images and gossip about their “private” lives. These early paparazzi knew that the stars’ fans, which is what members of the movie audience came to be called, were more interested in these “real” stories and images than they were in the fictional screen ones, whether they were happy photo-ops of Marilyn Monroe on her honeymoons or tales of scandal, like Elizabeth Taylor’s affair with Eddie Fisher while the latter was still married to

Debbie Reynolds. An entire tabloid and magazine news industry—combining the old technology of print with the new technology of high-speed snapshot photography and halftone printing—developed around the star-as-image; one could get to know stars personally as tabloid gossip items, and publicly, as movie idols, all in the same breath. This dual experience fostered a new kind of infectious pleasure and inspired a passion for celebrity minutiae; it facilitated deep imaginative play between real and fictional realms and became an abiding social pleasure-seeking habit.

Celebrity proper is born in the space between star-as-real-person and star-as-entertainment phenomenon. Celebrity means being celebrated, and it involves being seen by many. It also requires being seen in many places and being continually re-imagined. Once fans got to know their star in both real life and the movies, the star's power became detached from specific media. The star's persona developed in new combinations to become an independent power, a force which could move through many levels that encompassed both real life and all mediated forms of life. However, the difference between the two is erased by celebrity's power: celebrity becomes an agency separate from any traditional conception of culture and art, and while moving through any culture, reinvents it. An early example of this mobility is Grace Kelly. Working with renowned directors and leading men (a number of whom she bedded), she starred in eleven movies, received an Oscar for one of them, and at the height of her career left Hollywood to marry Prince Rainier III of Monaco, which transformed her into Her Serene Highness the Princess of Monaco. The marriage of Prince and Movie Star was fodder for non-stop tabloid gossip and speculation, calculated and choreographed public appearances, and late-night television reruns. Princess Grace, as she became known, appeared on stamps, royal coats-of-arms, and money, and was the first entertainment star to achieve "real-life celebrity."



2.

When television began broadcasting in the late 1940s, the separate worlds of the tabloid press and the film industry joined forces again. Television, with its ability to link real life with fictionalized life, real time with mediated time, real people with “live” performers—and, most importantly, the private world of the home with the public world of politics and economics—was a natural habitat for celebrity power. The movie star could reveal her/his real behind-the-scenes self to the television talk show host, who was a celebrity in his/her own right, and after watching their chat the viewer could see the star in a movie. For the TV viewer, the imaginative play between fiction and reality reached new heights. Television publicity and star-mongering promoted further magazine and tabloid growth, and the self-generating and regenerating multi-mediation that is the “celebrity machine” clicked into gear.

Once celebrity power had become an independent agency, detaching itself from specific media as well as from real life, it became available to other kinds of public individuals. Sports stars and music stars had, even before the birth of the movie star, a quasi-independent celebrity existence, because their disciplines involved strict, organized routines, but now they could step fully into the new limelight as multi-tasking celebrities detached from these routines. Early examples of music stars who crossed over into film and became multi-platform celebrities are Bing Crosby, Dean Martin, and Frank Sinatra, with Elvis Presley following a generation later. Crosby starred in music halls, on radio, in film, and on TV; Martin began his career as a boxer, then became a crooner, comedian, and movie star; and Sinatra was America’s first teenage idol and heartthrob-cum-movie-star-cum-independent-celebrity and precursor to Elvis, who would be regarded as The King. The phenomenon continues to this day, with musicians-turned-“actors” like Eminem, Beyoncé,

Justin Timberlake, and Madonna. All these performers expertly negotiated star power that was gained in one idiom and medium into currency that flowed into others; along with their agents, managers, and fans, they laid the groundwork for the modern celebrity brand as commodity.

Once power is in the air, politicians soon make their appearance. Political communication had for decades focused on public oration (Abraham Lincoln gave six-hour public speeches, just as Fidel Castro did until recently), and then turned to radio (Hitler, Churchill, FDR), but the politician-as-celebrity came into existence in the television age. Its first great North American representatives were John F. Kennedy, the first president elected in no small part due to television, given his youth and good looks, and Canadian prime minister Pierre Trudeau, whose dynamic persona resulted in “Trudeaumania.” The latter-day apogee of is, of course, Bill Clinton, who came into his own right when he played the saxophone on Arsenio Hall’s television talk show during his first presidential campaign. Kennedy was a master at using media to his advantage, and his beautiful almost blue-blooded wife Jacqueline shared the talent. America was mesmerized by Jacqueline’s beauty and class, with millions watching her on television when she gave them a tour of the White House. Trudeau, of course, also used the acquisition of a wife to great televisual advantage, and is the first Canadian prime minister to found a potential lineage. The politician-as-star and then as a celebrity, ushers in a new kind of polity. Political procedures become show business protocols, advertising and marketing practices take over election campaigns, and democracy becomes visual, a matter of correct branding and brand management.

The promotion of branded products started as the modern celebrity culture came of age. In fact, the branding of goods has much in common with the “branding” of

celebrities; power is derived from a high recognition factor. Both are free-floating signifiers (as scholars call them) of desire; they capture the audience's attention by their "openness," and their ability to generate multiple meanings or stories. If products are the celebrities of the economy—and if movie stars, music and sports stars, then politicians turn to this source of status and power—we can understand that economics has *become* culture: the market is now the source of all meanings as well as all goods. Branding erases the separation between economic and the cultural realms, between marketing and communication. In the "new economy," as it is called today, the brand is king, whether person or product. Celebrity moves in from either end, and we—the audience, the fans, the celebrity-watchers—become consumers of re-imaged, re-imagined, and reconstructed culture.

A few other celebrity types need to be mentioned here. Fashion models, who were initially understood to be display vehicles for clothes and accessories, increasingly, as a result of TV advertising and new developments in magazine photography, became stars in their own right. When they discovered this, they, like the movie stars, bargained this star power into celebrity positioning. They appeared on talk shows, made guest appearances in soaps and sitcoms, and soon, especially when they began to make "public appearances" as defenders of causes, they fully entered the realm of the celebrity. They became supermodels, a status which Cindy Crawford, one of the first, likened to being The Real Thing. (Just like Coca-Cola, one of the products she hawked.) It seems appropriate that as models became celebrities, they too were prey to scandal and intrigue, as evidenced by our fascination with Naomi Campbell's various run-ins with the law for throwing cellphones at her maids, or Kate Moss's infamous cocaine video.



3.

The debut of *The Real World* on MTV in 1992 was the advent of the phenomenon known as reality television, which was in fact a combination of different television genres. Its most influential antecedent was the game show, a cheap format developed in the 1950s to sell products to housewives. Its second inspiration was soap opera, in which private lives and conflicts were explored by well-coiffed wanna-be TV stars. Other sources of inspiration were real-life travel documentaries, news “backgrounders,” talk shows, and live sports broadcasts. The reality format fused the different viewing habits cultivated by the earlier formats. Like the game shows, it was cheap (you didn’t have to pay actors) and, again like the game shows, it featured normal people (i.e. like you or me) as its stars. And, like the game shows, reality shows offered prizes, their biggest prize being not products or money, but stardom. The genius of the reality genre (aside from its cost-saving aspect) is that it offered everyday people, even viewers themselves, the chance to be seen by many while doing things previously done only by movie or music or sport or model stars—by being, in fact, themselves.

Reality shows, from *Survivor* to *American Idol*, *America’s Top Model* to *The Amazing Race*, have been the dominant television genre in recent years. They have spawned multiple offshoots and variations, been internationalized, and turned many participants into stars. These participants did not always become full-fledged celebrities (this being television, not the movies), but they established a sense of identity, a “this could be you, and at times even *is* you” kind of intelligence that embedded itself in the cultural psyche. Everyone is now, or, as we have always secretly known, could be a potential star and a possible celebrity. You don’t even have to be good; you can be stupid or awful. Whatever the case, you can be yourself

in every way, and the music, editing, dodgy “auditioning” and on-location direction involved in these shows (not to mention the occasional mean-spiritedness) notwithstanding, you too can be accepted, and seen by many, in many places.

Reality television’s popularity has influenced the news media as well. “Soft” stories once given a cursory thirty seconds at the end of a broadcast may now be the lead-off item, a shift in priorities that can be traced to the O.J. Simpson murder trial in 1994 and the seminal moment when O.J. was “on the run” through the streets of Los Angeles, with television crews capturing it all live. As a result, scandals involving celebrities like high-profile divorces, battles with drugs and alcohol, or other falls from grace, now make daily appearances in our lives, whether through *The National Enquirer* or CNN. The daily live coverage of the Clinton-Lewinsky hearings held America spellbound, and when Princess Diana’s car crashed in Paris almost in front of our eyes, the world wept at a tragedy staged, some claimed, by paparazzi.

These daily, real-time news stories, played out in the “real life” time of the television schedule, garnered huge ratings, as do reality shows. The difference between them is that in the former, the participants are already famous, and in the latter they are not—at least, not yet. Whether “real” or “reality,” however, when you watch and imagine yourself “in” the show, you feel the power of celebrity. You love your celebrities when they rise, because they are true and beautiful, and you rejoice when they fall because you know on some level that, of course, that they are also fake. You accede, in either case and in both formats, to a simple fact: that fame is reality, it exists, and it is available to all.

4.

In the age of the Internet, a.k.a. “the new information age,” the average-person-as-celebrity trope first introduced by reality television comes to the fore, and organized mass media plays its final card. In the new and evolving world of digital communication, the old division between media producers and media consumers, senders and receivers, stars and fans, and celebrities and followers breaks down. With a computer and an Internet connection, anyone can send and receive mass-mediated stories as pictures, text, and sound. If we leave aside the fact that a vast number of people in the world do not own computers (and will therefore never achieve celebrity status), we can say that with the means of (cultural) production now in hand we have achieved if not the real, then (of all things) at least a semiotic version of Karl Marx’s post-revolutionary classless society. In cyberspace one is, each in one’s own small way, a captain of industry. MySpace, YouTube, Friendster, Facebook, the Blogosphere, and Webcam-live-streaming offer open vistas for the canny entrepreneur that the old-time industry barons could not have imagined as they stared out office picture windows at their vast industrial holdings. One can be a kind of personal star in the new cybereconomy, a private/public celebrity, a diva or monster of the Internet; a director, author, and editor, all at the same time. Here, it is possible to be famous—a “someone,” in the private/public world of the computer screen—and be oneself *at the same time*. And one can be seen, in both modes, by many and in many places. Call them venues. Call them platforms. Call them “me”: I, Celeb.

The Internet has also increased tremendously the thirst for and availability of celebrity gossip and speculation. The advent of celebrity bloggers like Perez Hilton and paparazzi-driven sites like TMZ and X17, which feature celebrity stories and