

Celebrity Culture Is Beneficial

Celebrity Culture, 2011

"Celebrity, far from being a shallow artifice, often addresses the fundamental differences between the real and the false, the meaningful and the meaningless."

In the following viewpoint, Neal Gabler asserts that celebrities' lives provide enriching human narratives. People learn about love, family, and the pitfalls of fame and wealth through entertainment news and tabloids. The advantages of celebrity culture over movies, novels, plays, and television, Gabler further proposes, is that it takes place in reality and does not have closure, which makes it more satisfying for audiences. In fact, the author states that stories and news about celebrities unify the politically and socially fractured American public. Gabler is a senior fellow at the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California and author of *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. How does the author define a celebrity?
2. According to Gabler, what do the best celebrity narratives achieve?
3. How does Gabler describe Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie?

By now you've probably heard of or seen Jaimee Grubbs explaining that her relationship was emotional, not just physical, or Mindy Lawton describing an attraction to red underwear, or Jamie Jungers revealing who underwrote her liposuction. They are everywhere on tabloid television shows, personal-interest magazines, and supermarket scandal sheets. And just who are Jaimee Grubbs, Mindy Lawton, and Jamie Jungers? They are three of Tiger Woods's alleged mistresses—women with no ostensible talent or accomplishment to justify the attention save to expose their private lives for our titillation. In short, they are the epitome of modern celebrity.

That isn't a compliment. "Celebrity" has become a tarnished word, for which we may largely credit the late Daniel Boorstin, the eminent historian who defined it in *The Image*, his 1961 survey of what he saw as the devolution of America. "The celebrity," Boorstin proclaimed, "is a person who is known for his well-knownness." Boorstin was writing at a time of great cultural flux, with the rise of the mass media and an effulgence of what he considered trash, and he placed celebrity within the larger context of an America whose citizens were increasingly enthralled by imitations of reality rather than by reality itself—by the pretense of substance without the actual substance. He coined the term "pseudo-event" to describe counterfeit happenings like press conferences, photo ops, and movie premieres that existed only to advertise themselves. He called celebrities human pseudo-events: hollow façades illuminated by publicity. So it has been ever since.

But there is a less antiquated and reproachful perspective on celebrity—one that may help explain why Michael Jackson, Britney Spears, Paris Hilton, and now the new and revised Tiger Woods seem so embedded in the national consciousness. In this view, celebrity isn't an anointment by the media of unworthy subjects, even though it may seem so when you think of minor celebs such as [reality TV stars] Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag, or [the former fiancé of Bristol Palin, Sarah Palin's daughter] Levi Johnston, or the [White House's] gate-crashing Salahis [referring to Michael and Tareq Salahi, the couple who crashed President Barack Obama's first state dinner]. It is actually a new art form that competes

with—and often supersedes—more traditional entertainments like movies, books, plays, and TV shows (and the occasional golf tournament), and that performs, in its own roundabout way, many of the functions those old media performed in their heyday: among them, distracting us, sensitizing us to the human condition, and creating a fund of common experience around which we can form a national community. I would even argue that celebrity is the great new art form of the 21st century.

To be honest, I didn't escape the temptation to trivialize celebrity myself when I wrote my own analysis 10 years ago in my book *Life the Movie*. I called celebrities not human pseudo-events but "human entertainments"—not people who existed to be publicized but people whose lives seemed to exist to provide us with ongoing amusement. By this analysis, celebrities weren't just awarded publicity for no good reason; they received publicity because they provided narratives for us. Michael Jackson's life was a long, fascinating soap opera that included not only his success but also his tiffs with his family, his erratic behavior, his plastic surgeries, his bizarre marriages, his masked children, his brushes with the law, his alleged drug use, and finally his mysterious death. Ditto the life of Britney or Oprah or Brad [Pitt] and Angelina [Jolie] or anyone, even [reality show stars] Jon and Kate Gosselin, whose personal activities provide us with entertainment.

But what I failed to appreciate then is that human entertainment is not simply a carnival personified. In fact, celebrity really isn't a person. Celebrity is more like a vast, multicharacter show, albeit with a star, only it is performed in the medium of life rather than on screens or on the stage and then retailed in other media. No media, no celebrity. Technically speaking, then, celebrities don't have narratives. Celebrity is narrative, even though we understandably conflate the protagonist of the narrative with the narrative itself and use the terms interchangeably. That is why one can be famous, as Queen Elizabeth is, without necessarily being a celebrity, as Princess Di [Princess Diana] was. One has name recognition, the other a narrative.

To see the truth of this, you can apply a very simple test. A so-called celebrity is a celebrity only so long as he or she is living out an interesting narrative, or at least one the media find interesting. Indeed, even non-entertainers or people not ordinarily in the public eye can be grazed by the celebrity spotlight if they live a compelling enough narrative, which is how a Joey Buttafuoco [who made headlines in 1992 when his underage mistress shot his wife] or a Nadya Suleman [single mother of octuplets] or even one of Tiger's mistresses receives celebrity treatment. Typically, the size of the celebrity is in direct proportion to the novelty and excitement of the narrative—to wit, Michael Jackson and Britney Spears. When an individual loses his or her narrative or the narrative becomes attenuated, the celebrity vanishes—the equivalent of a movie or a novel that bores you. He or she is relegated to "Where are they now?"

This still doesn't account for the popularity of celebrity in a world where there are so many narratives to choose from, so many different forms of entertainment. Here Boorstin may have an answer. One of his complaints in *The Image* was that the democratization of culture had marginalized older art forms that could no longer satisfy a larger public as fully as the new ones did. He cited the movies as having driven the novel into psychology because the movies had preempted action and did it better than novels could, whereas the movies were less capable of plumbing inner depths. That left novels with a new franchise but with a significantly smaller readership.

Something similar seems to have happened in the competition between celebrity and other, older art forms. So many of our movies, novels, plays, and television programs have subsisted on providing us with

verisimilitude so that we feel what we are watching or reading is real; with identification so that we either believe the people whom we are watching or about whom we are reading are like us or like our fantasies; with stakes so that we imagine what happens to them really matters; and with suspense so that we are riveted because we need to know what is going to happen next. These are the staples of entertainment.

Given these ingredients, celebrity has tremendous advantages over its more traditional, and fictional, competitors. For one thing, celebrity doesn't have to create the pretense of reality; it is real. The stories are enacted in life, which is why, aside from the inherent drama of hookups and breakups, sex has featured so prominently in celebrity narratives. (So has violence.) There is an almost voyeuristic frisson in knowing that this isn't simulated as it is in the movies. Nor does celebrity have to labor at creating identification; celebrity protagonists are almost, by definition, culturally preselected on the basis that we identify with them (Everyman) or enjoy a vicarious attachment through them (Superman). And because there are real consequences to the events in the narratives—people actually divorce or fall off the wagon or die—something is always at stake. We don't have to suspend our disbelief.

Finally, celebrity possesses suspense that older forms can only manufacture. That's because traditional forms have closure—an ending when you turn the last page or when the lights go up or when the credits roll. But celebrity narratives have no final chapter. We don't know whether Brad and Angelina will stay together or have more children or cheat on one another or decide to join a monastery. We don't know what new revelations will arise about Tiger Woods. We don't even know the truth about Michael Jackson's death yet. We are always awaiting the next installment: the next romance, drug binge, arrest, incarceration, mental breakdown, pregnancy, accident—you name it.

And all this provides yet another, extra-aesthetic satisfaction that conventional entertainments can seldom supply. Long before celebrity reached its apotheosis, the great gossip columnist and radio broadcaster Walter Winchell, who purveyed the malfeasance and transgressions of the rich, the famous, and the powerful to tens of millions of Americans, understood that celebrity was a basis for an ongoing, daily national conversation that also served as therapy to a wounded country, albeit with a savage subtext of revenge. Reaching his own peak in the Depression '30s at a time of anxiety and fractiousness, Winchell managed to unify his readers and listeners around his narratives, not only distracting them from calamity but also giving them a rallying point of common reference that was every bit as powerful as the national symbolism that FDR [President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] promoted. Winchell turned us into a nation of yentas [busybodies or gossips].

This function is especially potent today in another time of uncertainty and division, when Americans are not only disunited over politics and values, but also share fewer and fewer common experiences. In the past, television, movies, music, even books were sources of national cohesion. Dramatically lower ratings for broadcast television, reduced film attendance, and plummeting CD sales have all loosened the national bonds. We have become a nation of niches. Celebrity is one of the few things that still crosses all lines. As disparate and stratified as Americans are, practically all of them seem to share an intense engagement, or at the very least an acquaintance, with the sagas of Jon and Kate or Brad and Angelina or Jennifer [Aniston] and whomever, which is oddly comforting. These are America's modern denominators, and in some ways Jon and Kate are our Fred [Astaire] and Ginger [Rogers, entertainers from the 1930s]—not, obviously, talentwise, but in the way they provide escape and give us something we can all talk about.

Still, it denigrates our favorite movies, television shows, novels, and plays to think of them as merely providing us with mindless escapism or subjects for conversation. Like all good art, the best of them resonate with us because they provide us with life lessons or because they capture the cultural moment or because they give us a glimpse of transcendence or because they stimulate the imagination. The best of celebrity has that capacity too, and just as the most complex films, novels, and plays have layers of meaning and even profound truths, so do the best and longest-lasting celebrity narratives, like Jackson's or Marilyn Monroe's or the Kennedy family's. These themes can convert a celebrity narrative from fact to metaphor, from entertainment to art, from gossip to an epic novel.

Reading *People* or *Us* or [celebrity gossip blogger and television personality] Perez Hilton, we learn variously about the joys of new love and the hurts of the old, the satisfactions of parenthood, the wages of sin, the punishment for hubris, the drawbacks to fame as well as its blessings, the risk of losing yourself and the exhilaration of finding yourself, and, perhaps above all, the things that really matter in life and the things that don't, which means that celebrity, far from being a shallow artifice, often addresses the fundamental differences between the real and the false, the meaningful and the meaningless. These are the concerns to which we have always turned to art to explain. Even the Speidi [referring to reality TV stars Spencer Pratt and Heidi Montag] story has a postmodernist subtext about identity, reinvention, the lust for fame, and envy that tells us something significant about ourselves and our society if we have the tenacity to dissect it.

In effect, then, we have invented celebrity and latched onto it because celebrity does a better job of giving us what traditional art and entertainments once gave us before they became too enervated to surprise us, or we became too jaded to be surprised. By the same token, in a symbiotic turn, many protagonists of celebrity narratives have become sophisticated enough to realize that they could recast their narratives as a way of sustaining their own celebrity, turning their life into their work. One will never know how much of Michael Jackson's eccentricity was a way to keep his narrative (and his celebrity) going, though we can be fairly certain that his decision to return to performing was intended as another chapter in his story: Michael's Comeback! We don't know how much of Lindsay Lohan's behavior is a way to keep herself in the public eye when she has no movies to do so. And we don't know how much Madonna's abrupt career changes and public romances are her way of manipulating celebrity to her benefit. We do know the effect.

On the other hand, even people who seem to resist creating narratives that might attract tabloid attention, a grande dame like Meryl Streep or a Hollywood nice guy like Tom Hanks, are sucked into the celebrity narrative vortex not because their lives are especially salacious or sensational but because their enormous talent and their success are themselves stories about which people want to hear or read. The *Los Angeles Times* recently ran a front-page article on Streep for no other reason than that she is America's most celebrated actress—a small narrative fillip. The story of developing talent and succeeding with it is a standard celebrity tale—though, as Tiger Woods discovered, the bland success story can rapidly transmogrify into an entirely different sort of narrative when more prurient elements present themselves. In any case, celebrity casts a wide net—not just pathology but also "feel-good." To which one could add this irony: [author] J.D. Salinger is a celebrity largely by creating a narrative in which he abjures not only celebrity but also society.

The upshot is that celebrity narratives today are so effective, so ubiquitous, and so vigorous that they overwhelm virtually every other entertainment and art form, even the ones in which entertainers originally made their names. Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, to use just one example, are far better known for their life

together than for the films they make, and there is no doubt that more people read about them or watch their exploits on *Entertainment Tonight* and *Access Hollywood* than attend their films. One might even say that their lives are such a big entertainment that their films are now a product of their celebrity rather than a source for it, to the point where their celebrity narratives can actually obscure their work, making it harder for an audience to accept them as the characters they play.

Yet it is not only that celebrity has triumphed over more traditional forms; it has, like cultural kudzu, subordinated the media generally. Since celebrity is a narrative in the medium of life, it requires magazines, newspapers, television shows, and perhaps most especially the Internet to promote it—a service these media happily perform and from which they get great residual benefits. As a result, the media are filled with celebrity narratives, constantly hawking them so that celebrity is to America today what the movies and television were to earlier generations, only more so. It is almost as if celebrity hangs ever-present in the ether where no previous entertainment has ever existed. We practically breathe it.

And so today we are gripped by Tiger Woods's story, and when his disappears, as it eventually will, another narrative will arrive and then another and then another, ad infinitum. That is how celebrity works—as a kind of endless daisy chain that amuses us, unifies us, and even occasionally educates us.

Further Readings

Books

- Robert Clarke, ed. *Celebrity Colonialism: Fame, Power and Representation in Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009.
- Andrew F. Cooper *Celebrity Diplomacy*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2008.
- Susan J. Drucker and Gary Gumpert, eds. *Heroes in a Global World*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2008.
- Michael Essany *Reality Check: The Business and Art of Producing Reality TV*. Boston, MA: Focal Press/Elsevier, 2008.
- Mitchell Fink *The Last Days of Dead Celebrities*. New York: Miramax Books, 2006.
- Jake Halpern *Fame Junkies: The Hidden Truths Behind America's Favorite Addiction*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007.
- Daniel Herwitz *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.
- Marina Hyde *Celebrity: How Entertainers Took over the World and Why We Need an Exit Strategy*. London: Harvill Secker, 2009.
- Fred Inglis *A Short History of Celebrity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Nathan Dwayne Jackson *Bono's Politics: The Future of Celebrity Political Activism*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag, 2008.
- Matthew Jacob and Mark Jacob *What the Great Ate: A Curious History of Food and Fame*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2010.
- Marlise Elizabeth Kast *Tabloid Prodigy*. Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 2007.
- Cooper Lawrence *The Cult of Celebrity: What Our Fascination with the Stars Reveals About Us*. Guilford, CT: Skirt, 2009.

- Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- Laurie Ouellette and James Hay *Better Living Through Reality TV: Television and Post-Welfare Citizenship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2008.
- Tom Payne *Fame: What the Classics Tell Us About Our Cult of Celebrity*. New York: Picador, 2010.
- Kathryn Petras and Ross Petras *Unusually Stupid Celebrities: A Compendium of All-Star Stupidity*. New York: Villard, 2007.
- Drew Pinsky and S. Mark Young *The Mirror Effect: How Celebrity Narcissism Is Seducing America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2009.
- Sean Redmond and Su Holmes, eds. *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007.
- Jim Rubens *OverSuccess: Healing the American Obsession with Wealth, Fame, Power, and Perfection*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2009.
- David Shields *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.
- Gary Stromberg and Jane Merrill *The Harder They Fall: Celebrities Tell Their Real-Life Stories of Addiction and Recovery*. Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2008.

Periodicals

- Ray Connolly "The Fatal Attraction of Fame on the Internet That Empowers Twisted, Inadequate Loners," *Daily Mail*, December 9, 2007.
- Selwyn Duke "Michael Jackson and Our Modern Celebrity Culture," *New American*, July 2, 2009.
- Kirsty Fairclough "Fame Is a Losing Game: Celebrity Gossip Blogging, Bitch Culture and Postfeminism," *Genders*, December 2008.
- Gregory D. Foster "A Celebrity Culture in Need of Heroes," CommonDreams.org, July 23, 2006.
- Madhukar Kamath "The Celebrity Culture," *Businessworld*, December 19, 2009.
- Dawn Olsen "Paris Hilton: Celebrity Culture Superhero?" Blogcritics.org, January 26, 2007. <http://blogcritics.org>.
- Matthew Pearl "Did Charles Dickens' 1867 Trip to America Inspire the First Stirrings of Modern Celebrity Culture?" *Slate*, March 17, 2009.
- Maria Russo "How Celebrity Culture Killed the Oscars," TheWrap.com, February 21, 2009.
- Laura Smith "You Say Celebrity, I Say Culture," *Behind the Spin*, October 11, 2009.
- Raymond Tallis "Stop the Sick, Degrading Culture of Celebrity," *Times* (London), October 14, 2009.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2011 Greenhaven Press, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning.

Source Citation

Gabler, Neal. "Celebrity Culture Is Beneficial." *Celebrity Culture*. Ed. Roman Espejo. Detroit: Greenhaven Press, 2011. Opposing Viewpoints. Rpt. from "The Greatest Show on Earth." *Newsweek* (12 Dec. 2009). *Opposing Viewpoints In Context*. Web. 20 Mar. 2013.

Document URL

http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/ovic/ViewpointsDetailsPage/ViewpointsDetailsWindow?fa
ilOverType=&query=&prodId=OVIC&>windowstate=normal&contentModules
=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Viewpoints&limiter=&currPage=&d
isableHighlighting=true&displayGroups=&sortBy=&source=&search_wi
thin_results=&zid=&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&
;documentId=GALE%7CEJ3010738207&userGroupName=tlc049072579&jsid=d8d
44adb
3128c93641f81efb2cfd20d1

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010738207