Joshua Gamson

America

Twentieth-Century

Greensense: Celebrity in The Assembly Line of Consumption

C. Lee Harrison and Denise M. Bliley

Blackwell Publishing
The Assembly Line of Greatness: Celebrating in Twentieth-Century America

The Sucker as Expert: Barnum and Nineteenth-Century

are both modern (in modern form, especially in our society),

The second is more than a slogan.

Writings and speeches of the great period of the late 19th century from public figures who were generally excused, from this period, the expression of a faith that

The "Great Day" was also the occasion of a distinction among our own.

Women have struggled and sacrificed in our society to make the world a better place.

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traits of the screen character. The “audience was assured that the star acted identically in both her ‘real’ and ‘reel’ lives” (Klaprap, 1985, p. 360). Publicity, advertising, and “exploitation” crews — organized together like newspaper city rooms and with 60 to 100 employees at their height — would actively create and manipulate the player’s image:

To begin, the department manufactured an authorized biography of the star’s personal life based in large part on the successful narrative roles of the star’s pictures. The department would disseminate this information by writing features for fan magazines, press releases, and items for gossip columns. A publicist would then be assigned to handle interviews and to supervise the correct choice of makeup and clothing for public appearances. Finally, the department had glamour photographs taken that fixed the important physical and emotional traits of the star in the proper image. (p. 366)

These activities took place within the power-from-the-top studio, with vertical integration allowing firm, though not seamless, jurisdiction.

The appetite for films, film stars, and their movie and private lives had by the 1920s become voracious. By the 1930s, Hollywood was the third largest news source in the country, with some 300 correspondents, including one from the Vatican (Ballo, 1985, p. 266). The most important outlets for entertainment celebrity stories were the film fan magazines – Photoplay, Modern Screen, and Silver Screen had monthly circulations of nearly half a million – and the columns of gossip writers such as Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons (and, publicizing a broader range of people, Walter Winchell in New York). With an eager and sensationalizing press in place by the 1920s, and a fully integrated oligopolistic film industry – by 1930, dominated by the “Big Five” studios – image and information control was not difficult to manage.

**Early Celebrity Texts**

Other routes to public visibility still existed, of course, but the process had entered a period of industrialization. This, then, was the state of celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century: the entry of visual media as “the prime arbiters of celebrity and the bestowers of honor” (Braudy, 1986, p. 551), a developed profession of public image-management, and an elaborate and tightly controlled production system mass-producing celebrities for a widely consuming audience. The discourse on celebrity remained in this period, for the most part, in line with the interests of its producers. The theme of the discovery of greatness, earlier termed a greatness of character, was translated into the discovery of a combination of “talent,” “star quality,” and “personality.” The claim was in a different vocabulary – the culture of personality (Susman, 1984, pp. 273-7) of consumer capitalism had overtaken the culture of character of producer-capitalist republic – but it was still one of an organic, merited rise.

The story of the press agent was alive and well, nearly always harking back to the image of Barnum. The new publicity profession slowly began to get some attention, but in these stories publicity was not a mechanism for creating celebrity but simply a means of bringing the deserving self to the public. At times, however, the new power of publicity media (and studios) to artificially produce fame asserted itself, deepening ambiguities in explanations of claims to fame. The visibility of a publicity “machine” stood as a threat to the notion of naturally derived celebrity status. The simultaneous promotion of audiences to controllers of the publicity machine defused this challenge. Celebrities at the service of the audience, however, brought a new problem; the suspicion that the images presented were constructed to gain an audience. The constant textual exposure of the “real lives” of celebrities – in their more believable, “ordinary” form, supported by a closer audience-celebrity “relationship” – kept this threat at bay.

**Discovering the Gift: Fame Explanations in Early Texts**

These changes were gradual and never seamless. Greatness in its more traditional, aristocratic formulation – virtue, genius, character, or skill that did not depend on audience recognition – remained a strong model in many early magazine texts. “Greatness,” asserted Ludwig (1930) in American Magazine, “is always productive, never receptive. It is both imagination and which give the genius his strength” (p. 15). The notion of a correspondence between greatness and fame, however, was clearly threatened in the early consumer culture. The elitist Vanity Fair, for example, was forever striving to distinguish the truly “great” from the commercially successful (see Amory and Bradlee, 1960).

These postures were defensive, and understandably so. As Lowenthal (1968) demonstrated, by the 1920s the typical idols in popular magazines were those of consumption (entertainment, sport) rather than production (industry, business, natural sciences). By the 1940s, almost every hero biography featured a hero either “related to the sphere of leisure time” or “a caricature of a socially productive agent” (p. 115). Most writing about famous people reported on their private lives, personal habits, tastes, and romances. Fan magazines took this sort of story to its extreme, reporting on the specifics of “How Stars Spend Their Fortunes”; exhibiting his home, her pets, their swimming pools; providing their beauty secrets, dietary preferences, expenses, travel plans, advice (see Gelman, 1972; Levin, 1970). In typical stories, Ginger Rogers explained why “I Like Fried Potatoes” while Hedy Lamarr explained “A Husband Should Be Made to Shave.”

Not only did attention shift to entertainers and their personal lives, but these famous entertainers also underwent a gradual demotion of sorts over the first half of the century. Early on, the stars had been depicted as democratic royalty (with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks reigning), popularly “elected” gods and goddesses. Lifestyle reports focused on “the good life,” the lavish Hollywood homes, the expensive clothing, the glamour those watching could not touch. But, pushed by the development of sound and film realism – and, I will argue below, by deeper difficulties – the presentation by the 1930s had become more and more mortal, “prettified versions of the folks who lived just down the block” (Schickel, 1985, p. 99). Rather than the ideal, celebrity was presented in the pages of magazines such as Life and Look as containing a blown-up version of the typical. “Stars now hold homes, live quietly and raise children,” a Life article (“The New Hollywood,” 1940) explained. “Their homes, once gaudy and too ornate, are now as sensible and sound
Exposing the Gift, Publicity in the Early Texts

System seen in these early texts

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Celebrity Texts in the Late Twentieth Century

The changes in the appearance and practice of publicity in the post-Bloomsbury era have evolved in response to new forms of celebrity and the expanding role of the media in shaping public perception. The term "celebrity" encompasses a range of figures, from political leaders to pop stars, whose lives and actions are closely scrutinized by the public and the press. This phenomenon has been facilitated by advances in technology, such as television and the internet, which have expanded the reach and visibility of celebrities.

Self-owned Commodities: Late Twentieth-Century Celebrity

One of the most significant changes in the celebrity industry has been the increasing focus on self-promotion. The rise of reality TV, social media, and other forms of personal branding has allowed celebrities to take control of their public image and to promote themselves in ways that were previously the domain of traditional agents and managers. This has resulted in a celebrity culture that is both more accessible and more controlled, with celebrities using their platforms to promote their brands and their public images.

From the perspective of media studies, this development has important implications for our understanding of how celebrity is constructed and consumed in contemporary society. The celebrity industry is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, involving a range of stakeholders, including celebrities, managers, agents, and fans. Understanding the dynamics of this industry is essential for anyone interested in the role of celebrity in contemporary culture.
CELEBRITY-MAKING REVEALED

In character terms, the admission of celebrities is grounded in merit.

The Assembly of Greatness: Celebrity in Twentieth-Century America

THE ASSOCIATION OF GREATNESS: CELEBRITY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY AMERICA

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JOSEPH CARSON
Conclusion: Democratic Celebration?


Notes

- Critical editors: Why don't you answer these questions? I may have forgotten.
- I'm so sorry. However, the account of the debates and their outcomes is not clear.
- Does that mean we are assuming the character of each other?
- The overall historical account here is a position switch between two versions.

The Assembly Line of Greatness: Democratizing in Northwestern America

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Olaudah Equiano

The advantages of a representative, participatory image but layers of other lacunae.

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Joseph Gerson
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Mountains of Contradictions: Gender, Class, and Region in the Image of Dolly Parton