Bodies of Digital Celebrity

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In a well-known sound bite from his classic book *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin (1961: 57) declared, "The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness." The phrase itself is well known enough to have become a common trope in celebrity studies; indeed, it was cited several times in the symposium from which the rich set of essays for this issue of *Public Culture* was drawn.[1] Boorstin's assertion has had more than its allotted fifteen minutes of fame, and its aphoristic citability suggests that the critical discourse *on* celebrity can become part of the discourse *of* celebrity, part of its very machinery and circulation.

Lest we become too dismissive of Boorstin's phrase for its very popularity, let us pause to reflect that its commonness is not necessarily problematic. That which is common or even commonplace is not necessarily invalid or value-less. There are standard things we might want to say about celebrity, and do say about it, and something like Boorstin's assertion might be one of them. The goal here is not to remake celebrity studies in some new and bold fashion, rethinking its very premises, revolutionizing the concept, but—and this might be equally challenging—to revitalize such studies and extend their common force in new directions, new situations, new contexts. In particular, these essays consider the extent to which the Internet—often charged with changing just about everything—affects both the content and the context of celebrity studies.

In this respect, the essays in this special issue suggest at least three such avenues for a new—and in the case of these essays, quite exciting—invigoration of celebrity studies. First, there is clearly still room for an expansion of basic theoretical premises in our study of celebrity. Sharon Marcus offers us a possible framework for doing so, in relation to both a specific contemporary case

1. "Celebrities and Publics in the Internet Age," cosponsored by NYU's Institute for Public Knowledge and *Public Culture*, New York, November 1–2, 2013.

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study and the longer history of celebrity. She starts with some of the binaries that can define our approach to the broad object of celebrity, whatever it might be in its specificity. Here Marcus, one of the premier intellectual taxonomists of our generation, has provided us nothing short of a schema for how to think about celebrity, including its newest iterations in the digital age. She pointedly turns our attention directly to the audience, pushing us to take seriously the interdependence of celebrities and their publics, be they voluntary or involuntary publics or fans. In so doing, Marcus emphasizes the power of celebrity influence, as well as the dependence of celebrities on their audiences. And here, of course, lies one of Marcus's many major innovations: framing the celebrity (as an individual and as an institution) as a part of broader social networks, a node that links disparate communities, including fans who become celebrities themselves. Without these nodes, these networks fracture; equally, without these nodes, the celebrities in question in many ways cease to be. In like fashion, Fred Turner and Christine Larson, for their essay in this issue, certainly have specific objects of study—namely, a set of new public intellectuals who across modern history had consequential encounters with emergent technologies and technologized modes of thinking. Yet, to study these intellectuals, the authors need a new *theory* of network, place, credit, and acknowledgment, as well as a new *theory* of public intellectuality, one that isn't about the stereotypical man of letters—think Edmund Wilson—tied to the medium of the written page.

As a second move, then, in the revision of celebrity studies, there is the intellectual yield that comes from looking at *new channels* in the construction of and dissemination of celebrity: there is now (as this special issue makes clear in ample fashion) a growing and important subtradition within celebrity studies of attention to the digital and the question of its role, unique or not, in facilitating and mediating celebrity. Here the essays deftly and carefully deepen the framework for the study of celebrity through engagement with new media, showing both the continuities and important points of departure in the digital environment. All the pieces insist on underscoring the relationship between celebrities and their audiences. In so doing, they make clear the affordances of the digital environment for facilitating dissemination of the celebrity's product, the increasing ease of becoming a fan, and the somewhat illusory increase in access to the celebrity, all in service of the production of celebrity itself.

As the essays often bear out, the questioning of what digitalization and virtualization bring to celebrity leads to a rethinking of the very terms of celebrity, so that the seemingly empirical study of this or that channel also becomes itself a mode of theorization. The new media platforms may, by their very existence, be

altering some of the celebrity studies infrastructure, so that the look at new modes for celebrity may also encourage refreshed theorization of new forms of celebrity; to take just one example, Alice E. Marwick's essay about the role a new medium (the selfie culture of Instagram) plays in the construction of celebrity simultaneously theorizes a new type of microcelebrity.

And, in this respect, the look at new channels also notably encourages a *new history* of celebrity. It's a complementary process: while many of the essays in this special issue look carefully at the newest new media and their promised new channels of celebrity creation and dissemination, other essays extend celebrity making into a past—a time before the most modern media but, nonetheless, in moments when media dissemination existed in consequential fashion. Carlo Rotella's essay reflects on one such process through the genre of journalistic profile, which necessarily requires a great deal of time spent together by writer and subject. Celebrity was and is made over *time*, even as the space may change. This collection is careful to remind us both that the newest media may not entail radical breaks with the past and that the past itself is not a different and somehow emptier place, bereft of the jockeying for status that we attribute to celebrity today. Celebrity and fame imply (perhaps necessarily) some spread of reputation; insofar as modes for the dissemination of fame/notoriety have long existed, we must be attentive to celebrity's long historical reach.

Third, then, in the new elaboration of celebrity studies, there's the extension of the notion of celebrity to *new types of phenomena*, new objects as much as new channels, and here assuredly the essays in this collection are rich with the diversity of the salient cases on which they focus their critical skills. Of course, our distinction between theories of celebrity, analysis of channels of celebrity, and reading of case histories is nothing but heuristic, and no more so in regard to this last topic, the role of the individual case in the elaboration of a new celebrity studies. There is, it must be admitted, a temptation in much study of celebrity today to fall for the case, to want simply and lovingly to describe it in all its detail (especially if it's a really cool or really odd or really unique case). Luckily, this is a temptation these essays readily avoid: each and every object of study—an Arabian singer resisting a dictatorial regime, a shoe-collecting spoiled rich kid flaunting his commodity culture, Filipino lounge lizards perfecting an art of pop imitation, Norbert Wiener (!)—is there not to be fetishized in and of itself but made to serve in broader arguments about celebrity and its fates today. Take, for instance, those lounge lizards as analyzed in Karen Tongson's essay on karaoke: we might think of karaoke almost as the demotic antithesis of celebrity, since any ordinary citizen can get up and sync him- or herself to the words in a forum where awkwardness

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or even talentlessness have their own rewards, but Tongson's analysis shows how complicated the matter is, and at several levels. As she deftly unpacks the case, karaoke's populist bent feeds into an opposite impulse: by allowing singers to inhabit the celebrity position temporarily, karaoke comes to resemble *American Idol*–inspired shows, where contestants try to display their own individual talents by making some famous person's song their own, if only in modest ways; in many cases, the limitations of skill, imagination, and genre (and, indeed, effort) mean that they cannot escape sounding like the echo of someone else's song.

By asserting the complementariness of the seemingly democratizing form that is karaoke (anyone can do it!) and the seemingly singularizing form that is the televisual song competition (only some of you will make it to the top!), Tongson shows, as do other essays in the collection, that the individual case study gains in reach and resonance when one relates it to other comparable (or contrastive) instances of celebrification. Hence, to cite just two examples, there are at least *three* different ways that Instagram builds celebrity (as in Marwick's essay) and at least *three* different ways that techno-geeks across history built networks of influence (as in Turner and Larson's piece). By inserting individual examples into larger arguments, the authors demonstrate the aptness of the selected cases *and their frameworks* through comparison and analysis.

And the benefit is to the readers too, as the expansiveness of examples encourages them to go beyond the particularities of the case to larger contexts. For instance, given the theoretical proclivities of Marcus's essay, it is tempting to play a game (as we imagine many of you did) of applying its theses to other kinds of asymmetrical relationships than the one she concentrates on: Does, say, Kim Kardashian work as well as Marina Abramović? Does asymmetrical interdependence also obtain between a rabbi or preacher and her congregants or between a professor and his student? And, of course, that's part of the point: these people also become celebrities if their influence reaches a certain point *for their publics, however defined*. This is of course not new and, if anything, is a pale reversion to earlier times of celebrification, when Charles Darwin's face was used to sell soap (without his consent) and Sunday sermons were major entertainment.

Making us reflect on celebrity beyond the singular case, the essays in this special issue are composed of interconnections not only within them but among them: that is, as we read the essays together, we see through-lines, recurrent thematics, emerge. For instance, notions of "ordinariness" and "authenticity" seem to cut across almost all the essays and raise questions, precisely, about the extent to which new media today really are (or are not) about giving more and more people access to forms that will, so they hope, single out fewer and fewer of them by

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rendering some of them as celebrities. Television is a mass form that is all about realizing that only the chosen, by whatever process, will become, in the title of a classic show, "queen for a day." As various of the essays show, there is the privileging of an almost amateur sensibility, what Tongson nicely terms "the karaoke standard"; anyone can sing, versus a professionalized, marketed celebrity product. Laura Grindstaff and Susan Murray's piece highlights the packaging of ordinariness both on television and in reality TV school, underscoring the extent to which ordinariness is itself constructed in a strategic and professional fashion. This is one of the conditions of possibility for digital micro- and macrocelebrity, as well as the growth of the reality star. New media in their ubiquity and their immediacy lend themselves to the aura of the authentic. But at the same time, this valorization of the ordinary and the authentic harks back to an older discourse, that of the Victorian and pre-Victorian era, in which amateurs were valued over professionals in that they were pursuing their goals (be they artistic, scientific, or other) for their own sakes rather than for (gasp!) money. The amateur natural historian was more objective than the professional scientist because his stake in the work was an independent one, not reliant on a particular set of results for his livelihood. The amateur artist was (so it was supposed) free of patronage and could thus pursue whatever visions he (or she) chose. Likewise with those in athletic competitions, whose history helps explain the current designation of "amateur" for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and the Olympics.

Amateurism is (and in Victorian times was) valorized for not being about money. But many of these essays are about amateurs who now want to make money and even think of themselves in terms of marketable branding: the reality stars that Grindstaff and Murray discuss, for whom a whole industry of self-help celebrification has sprung up; the karaoke singers and the *American Idol* would-be stars that Tongson presents; the microcelebs with their selfies that Marwick chronicles. As Grindstaff and Murray note, there is pressing need to pinpoint "the implicit economic transaction underlying reality-based television's (false) promise of celebrity for ordinary people: in exchange for full access to their thoughts, experiences, emotions, affect, body, image, and 'entrepreneurial spirit,' reality participants may acquire not only wealth and fame but an enhanced sense of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and well-being" (115).

Here the amateur/professional distinction blurs in an age where media industries treat consumers as sources of unpaid, outsourced labor (summed up in that wonderfully ideological notion of the prosumer, assumed to be creative but really working for the culture industry). Certainly, there's a bottom-up side to celebrity today (anyone can take a selfie if he or she knows how), but there's still also a top-

down side in which amateurism is in fact cultivated by media industries, as Grind-staff and Murray so trenchantly pinpoint. Marwick makes a similar point with her reminder that only the coolest of the cool and cutest of the cute "ordinary" people tend to become celebrities on Instagram, where norms of privilege and beauty and consumerist success still prevail. Even when no industry directives are explicitly at hand, where no one is paying these prosumers to be this way, these would-be-cool Instagrammers are still often working according to values they've internalized from capitalist ideology and commodity culture.

And insofar as this is indeed all about working—working at cultivating an image, working at building networks, working as outsourced labor for new media industries that need product and turn increasingly to ordinary talent and, indeed, to ordinariness as itself a form of talent, and so on—it's also all about the body. It's easy in a digital age that speaks of the virtual (the earlier buzzword was *simulacral*) to think that celebrity is now something ineffable, something that floats above the world (as "stars" do), something whose best existence is in bytes and pixels and suchlike. But even as new media can create celebrity at a distance, across reaches of temporality and geography, it still often comes back to bodies. One might try to achieve celebrity by leaving some former, rooted identity behind, as Rotella shows that Floyd Mayweather Jr. wanted to do. Mayweather, Rotella says, "worked hard to promulgate an image of himself as insulated by his millions from social order and destiny and even the strictures of space and time—which is the underlying logic of much of his program of self-presentation, from impromptu jet excursions to his habit of deciding on the spur of the moment to make his entourage trail him in a caravan of SUVs while he goes for a run at 3 a.m." (12). Yet even here, Mayweather has to labor insistently and incessantly at the new jetsetter identity (which is corporeal and physicalized in its own way), and he can never forget that deep down he is still just a boxer, a hunk of meat to be punched (or, as Rotella nicely shows, a hunk of meat whose success depends on avoiding getting punched as long as he can).

More poignantly, one can cite the case of the Syrian singer Assala in Marwan M. Kraidy's essay: even as Assala benefited from newly transnational media conditions in the Arab world that extended her celebrity beyond any one country, that very cosmopolitanism came back to haunt her in a very rooted political struggle. Her opposition to the Syrian ruling party led to charges of antipatriotism in a specific country. Even more, the very fact that Assala had once received government aid in the treatment of an intense physical ailment came to be seen by her adversaries as another mark of ingratitude, a treasonous rejection of the regime that

ostensibly had saved her. Assala's oppositional politics was conducted in digital forms, but it was a struggle over corporeal bodies: hers and, as Kraidy so astutely shows, that of the dictator Bashar al-Assad, who was supposed to be above mere realms of politicking and stand for something more transcendental.

Corporealities are on the line everywhere in these essays. We have emoting bodies, like those of the melodramatic performers of reality television in Grindstaff and Murray's analysis—is there any term that catches the interlink of economy and body better than that of the "money shot," derived from porn but used here to refer to the moment of revelatory outpouring of affect on reality TV? We have still, posing bodies (those of Abramović and the sitters poised in front of her, as Marcus notes); preening bodies (for instance, those wannabes taking selfies in front of public bathroom mirrors, in Marwick's study); singing and disguised bodies (Jewel dressing frumpily as an ordinary karaoke crooner, in Tongson's critical reflection); and even schlumpy professorial bodies (Wiener as unlikely celebrity, in Turner and Larson's narrative). These accounts of bodies that labor to build celebrity reiterate the worldliness of celebrity even as the phenomenon seems to take on flights of virtuality in today's mediatized world.

The question of bodies, of corporeality, of materiality, turns our attention to what varied traditions in cultural studies have approached as the question of "liveness." Much of the power of celebrities lies in their very liveness (aliveness? livingness?), their existence as actual people who can and must, as Marcus emphasizes, communicate the illusion of access. That tantalizing fantasy of the real celebrity self is maintained and mediated largely through digital production and reproduction; celebrity today rests on a platform that provides a level of access that feels authentic while being highly managed and produced. The digital form offers us not the corporeal body of celebrities, and celebrity, but only its possibility. As these essays show, this possibility is the result of (often obscured, often uncompensated, often unacknowledged, but still very real) labor and effort. The digital celebrity is coconstitutive with, but not inextricable from, the body of the celebrity him- or herself. And as these essays also highlight, we always already knew that. Maybe, when we relate to celebrities ourselves, we don't really mind. But as these essays also show, in an effort to be more attentive to the limitations of the seeming democracy of this new space and the seeming egalitarianism of its participants, perhaps we should.

Reference

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