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## The Celebrity-Icon

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article develops a non-reductive approach to celebrity, treating it as an iconic form of collective representation central to the meaningful construction of contemporary society. Like other compelling material symbols, the celebrity-icon is structured by the interplay of surface and depth. The surface is an aesthetic structure whose sensuous qualities command attention and compel attachment; the depth projects the sacred and profane binaries that structure meaning even in postmodern societies. While celebrity worship displays elements of totemism, it also reflects the eschatological hopes for salvation that mark post-Axial Age religion. The attacks on celebrity culture that inform critical public and intellectual thinking resemble iconoclastic criticisms of idol worship more than they do empirical social scientific study.

### **KEY WORDS**

celebrity / cultural sociology / Durkheim / icon / sacred/profane / totem / transitional object

Fifty years ago, in ‘The Face of Garbo’, Roland Barthes described the film star’s make-up as ‘an absolute mask’ whose ‘snowy thickness’ gave her a ‘totem-like countenance’ (Barthes, 1972 [1957]). Barthes’s description exudes wistful adoration, yet there is irony, too. His breathlessness casts doubt on the barrier erected by his master, Lévi-Strauss, between cold and hot societies, the totemic and the mechanical, or ratiocinative (Lévi-Strauss, 1967).

Moderns associate rigid and stereotyped visages with primitive societies, with the Inuit totem poles and African masks that stare out lifelessly in the museum spaces dedicated to dead societies. Once, these wooden carvings were

regarded as totems, religious symbols of the sacred and profane that sustained meaning, ritual, and solidarity. It seems easy to agree with Lévi-Strauss that totemism marks only the earliest and most irrational societies. We see such wooden visages as distorted representations, badly carved, far from the realism of contemporary information societies.

When sophisticated moderns approach celebrities they see neither totem nor meaning, neither ritual solidarity nor symbolic form. When their realism is sympathetic, they see deserved fame and great achievement, as in a Joe DiMaggio or Denzel Washington. When their realism is critical, which is more often, they see celebrities as products of fakery, as deflated symbols, manipulated puppets.

Perhaps we should not so quickly separate ourselves from ancient peoples and their cold societies. Might it be possible to understand celebrity in an iconic manner, as a sign of the primitiveness of the modern or the modernity of the primitive? In what follows, I will contend that celebrities are, in fact, among the most powerful icons of our times. Whether we characterize these times as modern or primitive, totem-like material symbols continue to structure our culture and economy today. The reality of this iconic structuring is invisible to reductionist theories that take a realist approach, which make culture a dependent variable that can be explained only by other, non-cultural, more material things. To understand the iconicity of celebrity, we must move beyond the sociology of culture to a cultural sociology, to a strong program (Alexander and Smith, 2003, forthcoming) that gives meaningful patterns and the emotions that underpin them the autonomy and attention they deserve.

Like other compelling material symbols, the celebrity-icon is structured by the interplay of surface and depth.<sup>1</sup> The surface of the celebrity-icon is an aesthetic structure whose sensuous qualities command attention and compel attachment. Describing Garbo's face as 'at once perfect and ephemeral', Barthes asserts that it is 'set in plaster, protected by the surface of color'. Ephemeral perfection engraved into a permanent form – we are in the world of Kant's third critique, outside of truth and justice, the world of the beautiful (though not yet the sublime).<sup>2</sup> If color and light constitute one dimension of the aesthetic, shape and symmetry define the other. Barthes extols Garbo's image for its 'thematic harmony', tracing 'the relation between the curve of her nostrils and the arch of her eyebrows'. The sensuous and beautiful surface of the Garbo-icon triggers absorption. Its aesthetic force sustains mystical rather than ascetic experience. By 'capturing the human face', Barthes attests, Garbo's image 'plunged audiences into deepest ecstasy', allowing 'a kind of absolute state of the flesh'. The subject/object distinction that sustains rationality is obliterated, for 'one literally lost oneself in a human image'.

Yet, behind the aesthetic structure of Garbo-surface there is the moral structure of Garbo-depth. The Garbo-icon is a sign, consisting of signifier and signified. 'Garbo' stands not only for beauty but for the sacred. It/she has a religious significance, committing us to moral ideals. Here, we are in the world not of the third but the second of Kant's critiques, the world defined sociologically

by Durkheim as resting upon the division between sacred and profane (Durkheim, 1996 [1912]). As Barthes reminds us, Garbo was called '*La Divine*'. She had, it was thought, not only a beautiful but a 'deified face', a sacred visage that suggests 'the essence of the corporeal person, descended from a Heaven where all things are formed and perfect in the clearest light'. As icon, Garbo represents not only aesthetic but moral power. The Garbo-icon communicates 'an archetype of the human face ... a sort of Platonic idea of the human creature'. The beauty of Garbo-surface, the visible signifier, connects us to the invisible meaning of Garbo-depth, the sacred signified, the spiritual essence of the human being.

## Subjectivation and Objectification

Celebrity-icons are objects of worship. Social observers and the lay public alike speak of the 'real hunger' they experience for celebrity images and information; of their 'insatiable appetite'; of how the extraordinary expansion of print, digital, and television celebrity coverage<sup>3</sup> has provided an 'opportunity to indulge', to finally 'sate the desire for celebrity news and gossip'. As one young woman enthused about the increasing number of weekly celebrity magazines, 'I don't want to have to wait a whole month to find what celebrities are wearing!' An entertainment journalist describes the intensified coverage as an 'all-you-can-eat buffet' (quoted in Davies, 2005; Maurstad, 2005). A celebrity actor's son exclaims, 'Go look at the magazines. Go look at the grocery store ... There's a crazy, insatiable lust for celebrity in this country' (Bentley, 2005).

Celebrity-icons are transitional objects for adults, mediating between internal and external reality, between the deepest emotional needs and contingent possibilities for their satisfaction.<sup>4</sup> Yet, while saturated with emotion, the celebrity object carries a thoroughly cultural effect. The magnetic attraction of its material-aesthetic surface allows its depth-significance to be subjectified, to be taken into the heart and flesh. Worshipers describe this introjection process as if the celebrity-icon actually becomes part of their internal self. Speaking about her fellow actress Gwyneth Paltrow, Julia Roberts remarked, 'She's got a face you want to look at for a very long time; you want to absorb it' (Hichman, 1996, quoted in Gilligan, 2000).

One day after George Harrison died, a 39-year-old British fan came to mourn outside Abbey Road Studios, which the Beatles had 'immortalized when they crossed the street for the iconic photograph on the cover of the "Abbey Road" album', in the words of the American reporter observing the scene. Acknowledging 'I never met George Harrison,' the British fan still declared 'I've known him since I was 10 years old.' Another mourner at the shrine, a 23-year-old law student from Irvine, California, described Harrison as 'part of the most influential group of people in my life'. Insisting 'that's not an overstatement', he explained there are 'my parents, of course, that goes without saying. But then the Beatles' (Lyll, 2001).

If introjecting the celebrity-icon allows both the outside and the inside of the material sign to be subjectified, it paradoxically stimulates a process of externalization. By turning their newly formed subjective self feelings into objects – objectification in Hegel’s sense – supplicants materialize the surface and depth of their iconic consciousness.<sup>5</sup> When a 19-year-old American woman was asked why she had cut and pasted a picture of the paper-thin actress Mary-Kate Olsen into her journal, she explained ‘I *admire* her’ and added, ‘This is what I am striving to be like’ (Wulff, 2004). In February, 1998, Gwyneth Paltrow appeared on the cover of British *Vogue* with her new look, a messy bob of blond, ear-length hair. It triggered a ‘stampede to the hair salons’ by women demanding ‘a Gwyneth’ (Maxted, 1998). Two years later, when Paltrow’s premier in *The Talented Mister Ripley* displayed her newly chestnut brown hair, women’s magazines trumpeted advertisements such as ‘Look like Gwyneth for just \$6.99.’<sup>6</sup> When *Ripley* became the official film of London Fashion Week, material iterations of her clothing from the movie appeared in British shops from Harvey Nichols to Etam, ‘with mid-length skirts, capri pants and fitted tops filling the shop windows.’<sup>7</sup> No wonder that Paltrow was described by a *Vogue* editor as ‘the actress every designer wanted to dress’ (Katz, 1996). Only by purchasing and wearing copies of her garments could fan-worshippers materialize their Gwyneth-subjectivities. They could touch and display the same material surfaces as the icon-celebrity herself. At once experiencing aesthetic absorption and projecting a new materiality, they could become ‘Gwyneth’ themselves.

In November, 2006, *Harper’s Bazaar* devoted their cover story to Natalie Portman wearing the ‘Little Black Dress’ (LBD) that Hubert de Givenchy had designed and Audrey Hepburn had worn as Holly Golightly in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. In her ‘Editor’s Letter’ introducing the issues, Glenda Bailey played the now familiar chords of celebrity-iconicity. From her first sentence, the powerful fashion journalist confesses and celebrates the experience of absorption. ‘Channeling Holly Golightly on my very first trip to New York,’ she recalls, ‘I dropped off my bags, jumped in a cab, and went straight to Tiffany’s’ (Bailey, 2006).<sup>8</sup> In passing we should note the reference to the movie persona of the Audrey-icon rather than to the actress herself. As we will see later, this reveals something about the deeply layered quality of the totem-construction process. But what concerns us here is subjectification, or ‘channeling’, and Bailey suggests that, after successfully establishing herself as a professional woman, her money and power allowed this absorption process to be experienced in an even more vivid and powerful way. ‘Many years later,’ she writes, ‘after I had moved here, my team surprised me on my birthday by kidnapping me on my way to work. When the blindfold came off, I found myself having breakfast at Tiffany’s!’

This account of subjectifying the celebrity-icon is literally framed by images of its objectification. Three photographs surround the editorial content of Glenda Bailey’s letter. On the lower right of the page is the famously incandescent still from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* showing ‘Audrey Hepburn as Holly Golightly’, paper coffee cup in hand, bopped hair on top and oversized sun

glasses, diamond tiara, and pearl necklace in place, staring into the jewelry store's display window in the early hours of her after-party morn. On the upper left of the page stands Glenda Bailey herself, in a full length color photograph, tightly smiling, decidedly middle-aged and not particularly winsome, dressed in suede jacket and wool plaid skirt, clutching an over-sized brown purse; the caption reads 'Glenda and her Kelly bag, once owned by Audrey Hepburn'.<sup>9</sup> As the editor joyfully explains to her readers, this exercise in objectification provided her, quite fortuitously, with the opportunity to experience absorption all over again. 'When I purchased Audrey Hepburn's chocolate-brown Hermes Kelly bag at a charity auction in 2003', she writes, 'I opened it to find a pair of her suede gloves inside. Even more extraordinary, they fit'. Finally, loosely spread out over the upper half of the page, we find a photograph of what looks suspiciously like Holly Golightly's yellow pearl necklace, with 'Own IT!' in oversized bold faced letters in the caption alongside. Glenda Bailey explains in the accompanying text: 'Because iconic frocks call for iconic rocks, we also asked Kenneth Jay Lane to create 200 numbered, limited-edition reproductions of the gorgeous pearl necklace Audrey wore in the film to be sold for charity.'

Scattered among these feverish confessions of an icon-worshipper there is a bit of text actually introducing the cover story. The sacrality of the subject's icon-celebrity goes without saying, but it is briefly noted nonetheless. 'If fashion has a patron saint,' Glenda Bailey intones, 'it's Audrey Hepburn.' There follows, immediately, another recounting of Glenda's contact with the divine. 'For my first issue as editor in chief of British *Marie Claire*,' she confides, 'I commissioned an interview with Audrey.' Accompanying that interview, there had appeared the obligatory photograph of the Hepburn-icon's aesthetic surface. The reproduction of the now aging actress's external image did not please the actress herself. She told Glenda afterward 'that she felt she'd looked hard in the accompanying portrait'. Glenda does not directly dispute this aesthetic-cum-moral judgment of aesthetic degradation. Instead, she stresses the generosity and character of the celebrity-icon's depth underneath. 'What I saw in the picture,' she stresses, 'was her serenity but also her strength and steely determination, two qualities that were vital to her role as a goodwill ambassador for UNICEF.' Glenda affirms for her present-day readers that surface and depth of Hepburn-icon are seamlessly intertwined, an essentializing attachment that defies the effects of age. 'Today Audrey Hepburn is remembered nearly as much for her tireless humanitarian work,' Glenda asserts, 'as she is for her timeless style [and] the black dress she immortalized in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.'

This ringing reassertion of the unity of surface-signifier and depth-signified comfortably confirms that Audrey Hepburn and Holly Golightly constitute a true sign. It also provides the segue to the magazine's cover story about Natalie Portman channeling the original Givenchy-designed Little Black Dress. '*Bazaar* asked Natalie Portman', Glenda explains, because she 'not only looks like a modern-day Audrey but shares her compassionate spirit as well'. Photographs of the still young and beautiful Portman in the iconic LBD will bring attention to its forthcoming auction at Christie's, an expected million dollar sale that Givenchy will donate to the City of Joy Aid Charity.

When we finally turn to the cover story itself, we are immediately confronted with Natalie Portman's mimetic anxiety. If she is not small enough, she will not be able to slip inside the surface of the LBD.

Oh, I was so nervous that I wasn't going to fit into it. Everyone kept telling me how small it was, and I'm not the type who can starve myself. I'm small, but it's not like I'm see-through.<sup>10</sup>

She is small enough, however, and, once inside, the icon's subjectifying power is palpable:

I did feel very elegant suddenly. I mean, you can't possibly measure up to Audrey Hepburn; there's no comparison. But the elegance that she exuded was transmitted to the dress, you know, the feeling, the emotion of it.

The journalist observing Portman's channeling effort judges it successful, in terms of both surface isomorphism and depth. 'The Israeli-born, Long Island-raised actress,' she reports, 'has oft been tagged the modern-day Audrey Hepburn, not only for her gamine beauty but also for her commitment to charity work.' Portman modestly demurs. Declaring that 'comparing people is only insulting to her unique quality', she protests that Hepburn is 'the original one to put her empathy before everything. She was a very, very special person.' Portman would have us believe that it is entirely for her moral depth that Hepburn became iconic. Despite her current advantage in surface youth and beauty, she places herself well below the original. She is a pale imitation of the original Hepburn-icon, whose significance depends on combining unique beauty and moral depth.

The surface beauty of Hepburn-icon reverberates in the aesthetic form of the LBD. The dress is 'very sensual', avers Riccardo Tisci, the current creative director at Givenchy, while testifying to the prescient modernism of its shape and form.

The front is severe, elegant, very clean, but at the back there is this very interesting neckline, somewhere between ethnic and Parisian: a softness that other designers in that time did not have.

Sarah Bailey, author of this *Harper's Bazaar* article, offers the aesthetic judgment that the LBD simply is 'perfect'. As for Portman herself, she is careful, once again, to connect shining surface to simmering depth. This time she points to how the material signifier calls up the modern female myth. Noting the Hepburn-icon's 'inimitable grace and elegance', Portman suggests that 'all women desire to carry themselves with that balletic grace'.

Givenchy's dresses complemented that in their simplicity. It shows confidence to wear such a simply graceful dress that is not calling attention to itself. Not showy, not flashy, just confidence that the woman herself will attract the gaze.

The LBD designer, Hubert de Givenchy, similarly pays obeisance to the 'one piece of fabric worn by a beautiful person'. Declaring 'I understood Audrey', he testifies, 'I loved her and I was completely dedicated to her, and this happens, I

tell you, rarely in the life of anybody.’ It is a matter of historical fact that, after Givenchy’s work in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, Audrey Hepburn asked him to design ‘looks’ for her in *Funny Face* and *Charade*, as well as her personal wardrobe. Only inside of Givenchy’s surfaces did Hepburn feel connected to her own personal depth. ‘His are the only clothes,’ she once remarked, ‘in which I feel myself.’ The dress and the woman, the woman’s beauty and her moral worth – only when these surfaces and depths are intertwined can they create the sign celebrity-icon. Possessing a charismatic power that transcends time and space, this collective representation of the beautiful movie star continues to shine today.<sup>11</sup> As Givenchy observes, ‘so we continue with Audrey’s spirit, because for me she is always still there’.

### The Heavenly World of the Celebrity-Icon

The divine beings that are celebrity-icons inhabit a radically separate world. It is extra-mundane and extra-territorial. Like the ancient gods and demigods, the world of celebrity-icons defies the laws of social nature that apply to others’ lives. Their world is no longer long ago but it remains far away. It is characterized by stupendous wealth lavishly displayed in a fairy-kingdom of secluded homes, outrageous jewelry, splendiferous clothing, gaga weddings, exquisite meals, orgiastic parties, and an infinite supply of equally famous and celebrated friends from every walk of iconic life.

When outsiders examine this world, they suspend their critical powers. In the world of the everyday, a woman with 200 pairs of shoes would be ridiculed as an Imelda Marcos; in the world of the celebrity-icon, she is admired as a princess. Transgressions in this heavenly world testify to its separation from the mundane. Drunkenness, public exposure and nudity, addiction, and bed-hopping only rarely are treated as offenses. They are taken, rather, as evidence of the extraordinary personal power possessed by such celebrity-icons as George Clooney, ‘*People’s* the sexiest man alive’.

Like other totemic symbols, the sacrality of the celebrity-icon must be sequestered, protected from pollution by the profane. Except for a few, very structured situations, celebrity-icons cannot mix with ordinary persons. Even the unicorn, however, comes down to drink at dawn, and on occasion celebrity-icons are ‘sighted’ or ‘glimpsed’. Press agents and handlers are employed as guardians of their sacrality. ‘Access’ is given to special agents of the public, who are allowed to speak directly to celebrity-icons in carefully controlled settings: on red carpets that roll into annual totemic celebrations; on late night interview shows where other celebrity-icons are gathered and set off from the audience; and in interviews with kowtowing reporters in exclusive and luxurious hotel guest suites.

What transpires during these visitations produces ‘revelations’, ‘very revealing one-on-one interviews’, and promises of ‘getting up close and personal’. Reports circulate about dinner party hosts, no matter how wealthy and powerful,

desperately waiting for promised celebrities to 'stop by'. Exclusively expensive cruises promise opportunities for 'ogling, mingling, and rubbing shoulders with celebrities' (*New York Times*, 17 January 2007). Exclusively situated homes offer the opportunity, if not for actual contact, then for occupying the same, celebrity-touched geographical space. Folk shrines have been built, throughout the USA, to protect and preserve deposits of celebrity contact, providing occasions for what might be called contact charisma. For fear of losing perspiration and lipstick marks, sheets and shirts are never washed and paper cups never thrown away. 'Abraham Lincoln Slept Here.' George Clooney auctioned his 2005 Academy Awards 'swag bag' for \$70,000.

Such fleeting moments of contact produce experiences of absorption. The less they are mediated, the more powerfully they communicate the sensuous thrill and terror of being in the presence of the divine. Visitations are followed by reports of knees shaking, hands tingling, and awed to silence speechlessness. This from a *New York Times* reporter: 'Mary Stuart Gile, a state representative from Concord [New Hampshire], was eager to chat about the moment Mr. Obama held her hand for several moments. "He is just electric, absolutely electric, and the kind of person you want to stand next to," she said excitedly.'

### **Aesthetic Essentialism: On Celebrity-Icons as Beautiful and Sublime**

Celebrity-icons are mythical characters in a rather strict sense. The roles they play in projected mass narratives, whether Presidents or Kings, whether factual or fictional, thicken the meanings of their aesthetic forms. Residues from these mythical roles stick to their aesthetic forms, which then become free-floating signifiers, shifters that project this surplus of meaning into everyday life. Their personas outside the big screen, or the world stage, maintain the capacity for myth.

While Kant intended his categories of beautiful and sublime to apply strictly to the understanding of aesthetic surface, these philosophical writings betray an everyday essentialism that conflates aesthetic with social categories, especially with gender and morality. Women are beautiful and beauty is womanly. The delicacy of the female beauty reveals the delicacy of the feminine soul. Men are not beautiful but handsome, sublime in their power and terrible in their strength.

It is rather astonishing that, 250 years and two feminist revolutions later, we find the same aesthetic essentialism, not in philosophy but in the everyday. The surfaces of the male celebrity-icon are sublime and the female celebrity-icon beautiful, and each surface carries the mythical meanings of its (putatively) archetypically gendered forms. The female celebrity-icon is a princess, a femme fatale, or a heroine, and her stories revolve around the myth of love. She is light, delicate, erotic, and, even if she is also adventurous and clever, possesses an

aura of the most conspicuous kind. There is 'something mesmerizing' about Angelina Jolie; when she appears 'everything lights up'. Gwyneth Paltrow is 'charming, elegant, beautiful, and divine'. The male celebrity-icon is a hero, a villain, or an antihero; he struggles over greatness in his mythical stories. His visage communicates wisdom, strength, and courage. Female celebrity-icons are hot; males, even if 'hotties', are cool. The female-celebrity icon is appreciated for the hours devoted to surface preparation; she is highly constructed, like a paper flower. Male celebrity-icons are not constructed but suave. George Clooney 'cuts a typically dashing figure'. He is 'movie star dazzling' but in an 'off-handed way'.

Like yin and yang and the gods and goddesses of ancient times, female and male celebrity-icons continuously pair up in unexpected but reassuring ways. Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner. Joe DiMaggio and Marilyn Monroe. Debbie Reynolds and Eddie Fisher, Eddie Fisher and Elizabeth Taylor, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Linda Ronstadt and Gerry Brown. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Maria Shriver. Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston, Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Brangolina.

### **The 'Individual' behind the Mask**

If the celebrity-icon is a mask, what of the 'individual' who lies behind it? According to lay common sense, celebrity is not a collectively defined, supra-individual role; it is the result, rather, of immensely talented individuals having earned their renown. But it is a difficult challenge even for the most talented celebrities to successfully perform their iconic roles. Because they are human beings, they can betray their own sacrality, engaging in behavior that profanes their hallowed images, so unworthy that it may threaten to break their royal and heroic spells. By virtue of their beauty and sublimity, and the virtues they signify, these deviations are almost always forgiven. Sometimes, however, mythical surfaces crash and burn, ending careers and taking the individuals behind the icon masks permanently off the world's live stage. Even then, the celebrity as mythical sign remains alive in memory, undiminished in its projection of charisma and power. What cannot be forgiven is the degradation of the surface form. Actresses cannot age if they are to be beautiful. Actors, if they are to remain heroes, cannot become fat or gay.

### **Iconoclasm, the Critique of Celebrity**

Modernity cannot tolerate the idea of the celebrity-icon. Men and women are the sources of religion; indeed we are gods ourselves. We make the rules; we are the heroes. We worship the everyman or everywoman, not idols. 'Celebrity' is delusional, a fetishism, an ideology, mythical manipulation.

Such democratic skepticism is healthy morally and politically. This is a long and noble line: Marx, Freud, Veblen, Galbraith, Boorstin, Warhol, Bourdieu, and Braudy. And it goes back much further still. The ancient Hebrews smashed concrete embodiments as false idols, golden calves that allowed deluded, ritualistic worship instead of demanding cognitive and moral reflection about an abstract, unknowable, and invisible god. This *iconoclastic* hatred for iconicism was reprised in the Reformation, and it is continued in the contempt for celebrity that continues to permeate the austere heights of intellectual and moral life today.<sup>12</sup> It is fueled, as well, by the republican myth of decline: there was a time when a person had to establish great things to earn the right to be called a celebrity. That was when men were men and heroes stalked the land. Now everybody feels they are entitled to their 15 minutes of fame.

This is good morality but bad sociology. Celebrity-icons are not untruthful and distorted fiction. They are real in the symbolic sense. If they do not assert themselves constatively, they do so performatively; if they do not clearly denote, they most assuredly connote. They are social facts, and, as Durkheim reminded us, social facts are things.

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## Notes

- 1 For this distinction, and its application to objects in high and popular culture, see Alexander (2008a, 2008b).
- 2 These aesthetic categories are explored particularly richly in Kant's pre-critical essay, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1960 [1764]). For an anti-Kantian perspective on aesthetic forms in contemporary life, which nonetheless draws on the categories of the beautiful and the sublime, see Gumbrecht (2006).
- 3 'While news magazines continue to fight declining circulations, magazines that focus on the lifestyles of the rich and famous are surging ... Celebrity lifestyle weeklies racked up impressive gains for the first half of the year. *In Touch*, which was launched almost three years ago, led the pack with paid circulation growing nearly 50 percent to 1.1 million ... *US Weekly's* ... was up almost 24 percent to 1.7 million. *Star* ... saw its circulation increase by almost 21 percent to 1.4 million readers [and] now with the rise of cable TV, there are whole channels and dozens of programs that focus on famous people' (Davies, 2005). In 2005, almost 3.78 million people bought *People* magazine weekly, most of whom were subscribers, with an estimated 40 million Americans actually reading the celebrity magazine each week (Boston, 2006). In the UK, the audience for

the 10 best-selling celebrity publications and the 10 best-selling tabloids – daily ‘pulp’ newspapers that are saturated with celebrity and read nationwide – is 23 million readers (Overall, 2005). In France, *Paris-Match* sells twice the copies of any of the national newspapers (Riding, 2005). This quite extraordinary increase in the media devoted to celebrity has been accompanied by an expanded range for the celebrity effect. For example, whereas advertisements once primarily displayed professional models, today some 20 percent of American advertisements feature celebrities (Story, 2006).

- 4 See Winnicott (1971). For the extension of this psychoanalytic theory of object relations to the aesthetic realm, see Christopher Bollas (1989, 1993). Also related are a series of more experimental psychological studies of self and consumption objects, e.g. Belk (1988).
- 5 For this dialectic of subjectification and materialization, or objectification, see Alexander (2008a, 2008b). This dialectic was, of course, the central theme of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, and it has informed the phenomenological tradition in modern philosophy since Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz. In terms of the argument here, it is critical not to conflate objectification with alienation, a conflation implied by Marx’s later writings on commodity fetishism and formally effected by Georg Lukacs’s 1920s essays on reification and class consciousness. This misleading equation of objectification with alienation has been central to the social scientific and philosophical traditions of ‘critical theory’ ever since, making it difficult even for the most ‘sympathetic’ and contemporary studies of celebrity to get much beyond the reductionism of ideology-critique. While Rojek (2001, 2004) has helped insert the celebrity phenomenon into the center of cultural studies, marking out a new theoretical and empirical research program, his approach pushes celebrity from cultural-social fact to symbolization of psychological desire. Celebrity exists because under capitalism ‘democracy perpetually fails’ (2001: 181) such that ‘consumer desire [is] never fulfilled’ (2001: 189). The culture industry responds to these emotional frustrations by creating celebrity, but the symbol is inherently not fulfilling because ‘the market inevitably turned the public face of celebrity into a commodity’ (2001: 14). Morin’s (2005 [1972]: 111) brilliant early work on movie stars similarly argues reductively that ‘the star corresponds to an affective or mythic need that the star system does not create,’ suggesting ‘the star system is a specific institution of capitalism on a major scale’. Marshall (1997: 37) creates a similar style of argumentation but under a late-Foucaultian program, suggesting that celebrities are produced by the manner in which ‘the mass-media play a leading role in governing the population’. Josh Gamson’s (1994) *Claims to Fame*, which represents the most developed case study of celebrity in American sociology, betrays the same kind of ‘weak program’ approach to meaning. While Gamson quotes fans as wanting to ‘catch a glimpse’ of celebrities on red carpets, he theorizes these occasions, following Boorstin, as pseudo-events. His work seeks to expose how people who work for the television studios create artificial enthusiasm for the show, telling people when to clap, laugh, etc. (e.g. Gamson, 1994: 110–11). He interviews magazine editors and others in the entertainment media business in order to offer a reductive, ‘behind-the-scenes’ look at the production of celebrity, polemically contrasting the idea that celebrities are famous because they are talented with his

own, critical realist understanding that celebrities are famous because powerful companies make them famous. In a similar manner, in a section entitled 'The Construction of a "Phenomenon": New Kids on the Block', Marshall (1997: 165) claims celebrities are not launched because they are talented, but because a powerful media producer thinks it would be profitable to launch their careers.

- 6 *New Woman*, March 2000, quoted in Gilligan (2000).
- 7 See Gilligan (2000). 'Iterations' is the term Derrida employs to trace the effect of background structures of meaning in successive performances, in opposition to the more purely pragmatic, quasi-instrumental understanding he attributes to the Austin-Searle theory of speech acts. See e.g. Derrida (1982) and Butler's (1993) application of this idea of iteration.
- 8 See Bailey (2006a). All quotations from this article are from this citation.
- 9 On the relationship between photographic images and their accompanying written captions, see Barthes (1977).
- 10 Quoted in Bailey (2006b). This and following quotations are from these pages.
- 11 On the charismatic status of movie stars as modern day demigods, see Morin (2005 [1972]) and also Wills (1997).
- 12 For the continuity between religious iconicism, the idea of commodity fetishism, contemporary attacks on materialism, and criticisms about superficiality of surface images, see Mitchell (1986).

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