

Michael Jackson, the Celebrity Cult, and Popular Culture

Paul Hollander

Published online: 12 February 2010
© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC 2010

Who Are the Celebrities?

The virtual national mourning and round the clock media coverage of Michael Jackson's death in July last year prompts renewed questions about the nature of American society and its apparent devotion to popular culture and its celebrities. As it may be recalled, for several days following Jackson's death all networks began their programs with the news of his passing followed by lengthy reminiscences of his life. It was impossible to turn on the television without getting yet another discussion of his immense and imperishable contributions. His death overshadowed and preempted all other news, domestic and foreign; with remarkable unanimity all major television and radio stations, and those in charge of their programming, decided that nothing merited greater public attention than the death and life of Michael Jackson. According to *People* magazine (July 20, 2009) on the day of his death "the world seemed to pause together to measure his loss... Jackson's life, and now his death, profoundly affected his millions of fans in a way that is rarely seen." Maya Angelou in her poem written for his funeral proposed that he will "sing our songs among the stars and walk our dances across the face of the moon." He was laid to rest in a "hand-polished, 14k gold casket—lined with crushed velvet..." as was also reported in *People*.

Not surprisingly the solicitous reminiscences overlooked and in effect purified his dubious private life, including his reported payment of 20 million dollars to settle out of court allegations of child molestation. Still, being an alleged child molester of uncertain sexual identity is not incompatible

with being a great entertainer or performance artist. However those of us not enamored of popular culture find it hard to know what exactly his artistic genius consisted of. But there is no doubt of his popularity, in the United States and abroad: tens of millions watched him on TV, bought his CD-s and records, listened to his music on radio and millions attended his live performances. Over a million people came his memorial service in Los Angeles and the cash-strapped city did not hesitate to pay for the costly crowd control by the police at the event. Masses of pilgrims have been visiting his former house and makeshift memorials have been erected at various locations.

The worship of Jackson is more than the exuberant recognition of a talented entertainer. A resolution in his honor was introduced in the U.S. Congress by U.S. representative Jackson Lee of Texas (in the Foreign Affairs Committee, of all places). It described him as a "global humanitarian, American legend and musical icon." The aforementioned representative also suggested at his memorial service (as reported by Gail Collins in the July 9/09 *New York Times*) that Jackson inspired her and her colleagues in the U.S. House of Representatives to enter public service. At his funeral Al Sharpton asserted that Jackson "brought blacks and whites and Asians and Latinos together" and "made us love each other." Sharpton willingly overlooked Jackson's strenuous attempts to escape his black identity by whitening his skin.

It was not sufficient to worship Jackson as a great entertainer, he had been also transformed into a veritable saint and tragic figure. As a writer in the *New York Review of Books* put it "In the end, the chief elements of his early childhood... won, and the prize was his self-martyrdom..."

It is possible that Jackson's confused sexual and racial identity contributed, in some obscure way, to his appeal to those who find a "role model" of a confused sexual or racial

P. Hollander (✉)
35 Vernon St.,
Northampton, MA 01060, USA
e-mail: hollanderaz@yahoo.com

identity appealing and believe that all identities are “socially constructed”. Jackson himself did not seem to believe in the social construction of identity but rather in its surgical reconstruction having had, reportedly, “25 facial operations.” (The results of 14 of these were shown in the July 31, 2009 issue of *People* devoted to him.)

The responses to the death of Jackson raise the question, and not for the first time, why entertainers are revered in American society and why are they the most common incarnation of the celebrity? Why is this society so profoundly entertainment oriented? How and why do entertainers like Jackson become apparent role models, even culture heroes? How can millions of people persuade themselves that they have some sort of a personal connection with an individual (the celebrity) they never met and will never meet, whom they only “know” from the carefully orchestrated presentations of the mass media, or by attending his performances? In what kinds of projections do grief stricken Americans (and foreigners) engage when they mourn the passing of a celebrity such as Jackson? More generally, why are Americans so susceptible to celebrity worship and why is the celebrity role capable of accommodating so many different kinds of claims to fame?

Similar questions could have been raised on various other occasions such as the death in 1997 of Princess Diana that prompted close to hysterical public outpourings of grief. She was one of the few celebrities who was not an entertainer but had in common with popular entertainers an ample access to the mass media that is the precondition of becoming a celebrity. Her claim on public attention and sympathy, even worship, appeared to have been based on her beauty, unhappy marriage, ambiguous belonging to the Royal Family and her highly publicized charitable activities as well as the huge amount of publicity she garnered. Her admirers could only catch distant glimpses of her on television or on the occasion of well choreographed public appearance; nevertheless she too somehow managed—presumably without intending to do so—to convince many people that she played an important part in their life.

In July last year there was another notable outpouring of sentimental accolades occasioned by the death of Walter Cronkite, the former CBS anchor. Although not in the same league as Jackson or Princess Diana his celebrity status was well established and it too raises questions rarely asked. To begin with, it is far from clear what great moral or intellectual accomplishments the role of the television anchor (or reporter) can inspire or accommodate? How much creativity, originality, insight or imagination this role may entail? Anchormen read the news someone else compiled and play little if any role in deciding what is worth to be presented during the precious 22 min of the evening news on the major networks. But even if they selected the news they narrate it is far from self-evident what, if any creativity their performance requires.

Cronkite was praised as a great truth teller, trustworthy witness to major historical events and for combining loyalty to factual news with some superior moral instinct, personal integrity and rectitude. Frank Rich in the *New York Times* was among those articulating this view. Moreover, Cronkite occasionally “broke” some important news, that is, was first to report something supposedly earth shaking—a greatly exaggerated accomplishment in the world of journalism. Characteristic of the posthumous cult of Cronkite have been the reverential references to his trademark concluding remark at the end of each newscast: “this is the way it is.” This banal phrase acquired a halo of wisdom, brilliance and originality.

On closer inspection Cronkite’s appeal had more to do with his *image* and demeanor—somewhat old fashioned, kindly, and avuncular—than with any particular talent, moral or intellectual accomplishment. Being an anchor for almost two decades and thus daily seen by tens of millions was his major accomplishment and foundation of his celebrity status. After all, as Daniel Boorstin pointed out half a century ago, the precondition of becoming a celebrity is to be known and it matters relatively little for what. An anchorman is in an exceptionally good position to be known. The durable celebrity status of Oprah Winfrey also illustrates the importance of regular, frequent access to television as the basis of popular acclaim. The role of the talk show host as a foundation of greatness and celebrity status is another occasion for perplexity for those who expect fame and admiration to have more substantial bases.

Paris Hilton is an example of the celebrity almost totally devoid of any notable accomplishment who achieved celebrity status due to looks, wealth, publicity and some scandalous activity or incident. She is described in Wikipedia as “socialite, heiress, media personality, model, singer, actor, fashion designer and actress.” Of these designation “socialite” and “media personality” invite further reflection. The former is defined by Oxford Dictionary as “a person prominent in fashionable society” but like the concept of celebrity it does not explain the basis of this prominence, or what defines “fashionable society?” A better definition of the socialite (invariably female) is a person who entertains lavishly and frequently (and has the wealth this requires), participates in important social events (balls, fund raisers, etc) and whose photos often appear in the *New York Times* society page (these days in the *Style* section). “Media personality” as a basis of fame is even more murky but obviously refers to someone who is often in the media for whatever reason; if so, “celebrity” and “media personality” overlap.

The notable accomplishments of Paris Hilton (according to Wikipedia) include “pose[ing] in nude, covered with gold paint, to promote ‘Rich Prosecco,’ a canned version of Italian sparkling wine.” The more scandalous, attention-

getting aspects of her life involved a homemade video of her sexual activities with a boyfriend and brief imprisonment for multiple, serious traffic violations. According to sources cited by Wikipedia she compared herself to Princess Diana and Marilyn Monroe; Guinness World Records rated her as “the world’s ‘Most Overrated Celebrity’”. But celebrities are by definition overrated. The case of Paris Hilton suggests that some salacious, titillating or scandalous event or aspect of life often helps to achieve celebrity status especially when they concern the lives of the rich and famous. In such instances veneration is replaced by (or combined with) satisfaction over the exposure of the flaws of character of the celebrities and their comeuppance gratifies a sense of justice, perhaps a scapegoating impulse as well.

“Puff Daddy” that is, Sean Combs is another instructive example of the dubious accomplishments of present day celebrities. The *New Yorker* described him a few years ago as “the 32 year old rap impresario, restaurateur, clothing entrepreneur, bon vivant, actor and Page Six regular” (whatever page six is, presumably a society page in some publication). The occasion for the article was his visit to Paris to lend glamor to a Versace fashion show:

“With his hip-hop credentials [!] and his love of spotlight, not to mention a past that includes highly public moments of violence, Combs provides exactly what the fashion crowd craves...He wore fur and leather and draped himself in enough diamonds to rival Princess Caroline of Monaco... [his accessories included] a silver tie, smoke colored sun glasses, diamond and platinum earrings, a bracelet or two, a couple of diamond rings the size of cherry tomatoes and a watch covered with jewels...”

The article specified—without a hint of disapproval—several incidents of violence he was involved in, illustrating the compatibility of thugishness and celebrity status, or the irrelevance of moral criteria to celebrity status that also applies to Michael Jackson’s cult.

Lauren Luke is a “digital-age media star...an icon [and] self-made celebrity” as the *New York Times* put it. Her fame could not have been attained without modern means of mass communication, notably the internet and one of its pillars, the *YouTube*. Her claim to fame has been the provision of online information about cosmetics and “her appeal is that she is the Everywoman... She *connects* [my emphasis] on an emotional level and her quirky honesty is infectious” according to a former president of Bergdorf Goodman quoted in the article. To establish such a “connection” is the cherished aspiration of advertisers, that is to say, to raise selling to the level of insinuating authentic intimacy that is intended to replace the brazenness of the cash nexus. A viewer felt that “she isn’t trying to sell

anything”—an even more elevated aspiration of all advertising and selling, that is, to conflate the “cash nexus” with disinterested good feelings and fellowship. The same impulse prompts banks and other businesses to refer to their customers as their “family” and politicians to call their audience “friends.”

Another example of the mysterious process whereby individuals of questionable accomplishments are transformed into celebrities is Takashi Murakami described in the *New York Times* Style section as a “jet-setting...ultra-genius pop start artist” allegedly enjoying “global recognition.” The article discussed in great detail the “lavish dinner party tribute” paid to him “by 120 of the wealthiest people around” during the Fashion Week in a New York City hotel. Once more the question arises: why do celebrities multiply and why people relish celebrating them?

According to *People* magazine Antonio Sabato Jr, (former “soap star”) “earned his fame” by his torso as a Calvin Klein underwear model and *General Hospital* star. Brian Boitano a former Olympic figure skating champion found his way into the same publication on account of his successful diet that led to a substantial weight loss; he also became the host of a new cooking show on Food Network. *People* devoted a 8 pages (photos included) to the separation and impending divorce of Kate and Jon Gosselin, “stars of the reality series *Jon and Kate plus 8*.” (“8” refers to the number of their children) quoting at length Kate’s reflections about her marriage. The same issue of the publication also informed readers that Bradley Cooper (“summer’s hottest star”) was dating Jennifer Aniston, another TV/movie star. From another recent issue of *People* we learn that the two sons of Britney Spears (age 2 and 3) “accompany Mom for most of her gigs” who has fruit and nuts for breakfast. *People* tends to focus on the family life of celebrity entertainers, who among them is expecting babies and when, or getting divorced, or else their love affairs and dates.

The rare politician to appear on the pages of *People* was Sarah Palin who attained celebrity status due to being a female vice-presidential candidate, an attractive woman, as well the attention-getting controversial positions she took; her lack of qualifications for the position she aspired to further contributed to the huge media attention she received.

Popular Culture and the Multiplication of Celebrities

There is a close connection between the celebrity cult and popular culture—it is in fact difficult to imagine one without the other. Much of popular culture rests on the popularity, on the celebrity status of particular entertainers, in turn these celebrity entertainers could not prosper outside the framework of popular culture. Celebrity entertainers could not thrive without the multitudes who wish to be

entertained and the institutions which create and disseminate the programs or events the celebrity is embedded in. Once an entertainer is a “certified” celebrity his or her name becomes a draw—the celebrity worshipers will flock to their performances and watch them on television benefitting the products advertised during these programs.

The entertainment industry has a vested interest in the existence and multiplication of celebrities and devotes large resources to promoting them. Hence the development of the “public relations industry” and the rise of “publicists” celebrities hire. Nonetheless the appeal of celebrities is not entirely manufactured; there is also a genuine public demand for celebrities, the susceptibility to their appeal does not reduce to the wish to be entertained. Celebrity worship fills a need which in the past, or in other societies, was met in different ways—or did not arise to begin with.

Half a century ago Daniel Boorstin defined (in *The Image*) the celebrity as a person who is “known for his well-knownness... He is the human pseudo-event ...fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness. He is morally neutral.” The celebrity is “distinguished by his image or trademark.” It is the egalitarian ethos of American culture and society which provides the foundation of the celebrity phenomenon, since it encourages everybody to seek fame and fortune and makes it possible for virtually anybody to become a celebrity provided he or she can muster sufficient publicity to become widely known for some reason.

The celebrity phenomenon is supported by another paradoxical feature of our egalitarian society: the toleration and encouragement of vast inequalities of income, social status and popular attention. This “egalitarianism” amounts to belief in and support for *equal opportunities for achieving unequal status and wealth*. Celebrity entertainers and athletes have a huge income, in itself a source of admiration and incentive to attain celebrity status Tiger Woods earned \$ 110 million in 2008 according to *People* and fellow celebrities in the world of entertainment earn similar amounts.

Another precondition of the rise of celebrities is of course modern technology that makes it possible to disseminate images of and information about particular individuals. As Boorstin also noted, the celebrity is “a largely synthetic product.” He or she has to be written up, photographed, filmed, interviewed, shown in the mass media. Without the mass media we would not be aware of their existence and their attributes to be celebrated.

While the actual accomplishments of celebrities are of limited importance in defining and establishing their appeal their physical appearance and patterns of consumption are central to their portrayal. In this regard celebrities have much in common with non-celebrities. Even supposedly high brow publications such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* or

the *New Yorker* are compelled to inform readers what particular individuals (not necessarily celebrities)—public figures, politicians, CEO-s, famous criminals—wore when interviewed or sighted. It is not apparent why is it obligatory to be informed what clothing celebrities and non-celebrities (including defendants in court) wear. Presumably such information is provided on the assumption that what people wear is an important and informative expression of their self-definition and self-presentation.

In an egalitarian society where the criteria for distinction or distinctiveness are not clearly and authoritatively spelled out, or widely shared, distinction is sought in a wide variety of ways including patterns of consumption and its display. Even those with lower income seek this kind of distinctiveness, as exemplified by the craze for sneakers among juvenile gang members and their ostentatious display of the latest “in” brand. In discussing celebrities Boorstin referred to this tendency as the pursuit of “the marginal differentiation of the personalities.” Besides conspicuous consumption other forms of attention-getting self-presentation are also harnessed to the pursuit of shallow distinction (“marginal differentiation”): gestures, vocabulary, facial expression, hair style, even sunglasses worn in a certain way—whatever would classify as a “trademark.” The importance attributed to these trivial forms of distinction suggest their compensatory character—they compensate for the absence of genuine, or substantial bases of distinction or accomplishment. It should also be noted here that some celebrities (especially entertainers) engage in highly publicized charitable or political activities which also have a compensatory character as well as an idealistic component.

The Veneration of Celebrities

A bizarre expression of the popular veneration of celebrities is revealed in the apparently widespread desire to be close to them physically—to touch them, or share the same space with them and be able to observe them from close quarters. “Celebrity spotting” (watching) in restaurants, resorts or places of entertainment is a widespread aspiration and its popularity is attested to by the recommendations of travel writers how to gratify such desires. An article in a recent *New York Times Travel Section* assured the readers that even in St Moritz (Switzerland) “despite the scent of exclusivity” they are “free to mingle” with celebrities such as “supermodels, business tycoons, former heads of state... the rich, the very rich...” A nightclub in the same location was recommended as a “celebrity haunt” providing “your opportunity to rub shoulders” with these important individuals. Readers were further assured that “you can attend their events, eat in their restaurants, walk among them, wear their clothes, sleep in the same luscious sheets.” No explanation

was attempted as to why these activities should be gratifying. Another article in the *New York Times* entitled “Feeling at Home Among the Elite” sought to assure readers that they could fit into the exclusive playground of Punta del Este, Uruguay, “despite its jet set reputation.” These examples of the celebrity worship further illustrate the limits of American egalitarianism that is compatible with the reverence ordinary mortals display towards the celebrities.

It would be instructive to learn from the aspiring, eager celebrity watchers, and the journalists who recommend the practice, what precisely are the gratifications attained by all such ogling, mingling and rubbing of shoulders? What kind of self-fulfilment is attained when they share physical space with celebrities? Do they entertain fantasies of establishing some sort of a personal relationship with celebrities by laying eyes on them? Do they harbor hope that sharing temporarily the same space will elevate their own social standing? Most likely the benefits of celebrity watching are so much taken for granted that it would be difficult to elicit a coherent explanation of the benefits of this peculiar and irrational disposition.

The Deeper Roots of the Phenomenon

At its core, the celebrity cult amounts to an emotional (if spectacularly misplaced) identification with the celebrity that resembles the peculiar, spurious loyalty and devotion football, baseball or soccer teams inspire in many people. Why people pick particular teams to root for is not clear unless such loyalty is a reflection of attachment to a particular city or region (or school) where these teams are based. These teams, like the celebrities, meet some need for vicarious identification, they become ersatz communities and sources of solidarity. The athletic teams inspire feelings of jubilation when they win, rage when they lose. But the motives for identifying with such teams are different from the corresponding sentiments directed at the celebrity: winning is crucial for the fans of these teams, whereas the celebrity by definition has already established his or her credentials. Individual athletes too can and do become celebrities and targets of adulation especially since athletes also provide entertainment. The celebrity status of entertainers and athletes is further confirmed and solidified when they provide lucrative endorsements for widely advertised products or services.

It is possible that what is most desirable and admirable about celebrities is neither their talent, nor beauty, nor wealth but the amount of attention they receive even if that attention is largely artificial, generated by public relations firms, publicists, and all those employed by the mass media. Arguably a large number Americans suffer of an attention deficit—a by product of individualism and the related fear of anonymity that leads to the feeling that they are

entitled, to but don’t get enough attention. Ordinary people are eager for the chance to be rewarded by a brief appearance on some television talk shows in exchange for revealing their mental, physical or social ailments, deformities and misfortunes in order to entertain their audiences. “Visibility” is a magic word in public life, even in academic life.

The intertwined phenomena of celebrity worship and thirst for entertainment may in the final analysis be explained by aspects of modernity and attributes of American society which are hard to separate. The thirst for entertainment is fueled by increasing amounts of free time, by discretionary income (since a good deal of entertainment has to be paid for) and the need to escape personal problems (including social isolation) which are no longer kept in check by externally imposed routines and demands as they used to be in pre-modern, traditional societies. It is a paradox of modernity that on the one hand people seek to maximize their free time, that is, free of work and apparently meaningless routines, but on the other hand are terrified of having nothing to do, of being bored. Hence the widespread reliance on mass culture as well as the cultivation of busyness to combat incipient boredom. Being busy is also a revered, self-evident status symbol—it means being important, being in demand, getting attention. Even the retired often boast of being “busier than ever.” The cult of business has a deeper cultural significance and more distant historical origin in the Protestant Ethic, in the respect for hard work, the abhorrence of idleness and in the more diffuse idea of “good works.”

In all probability a good deal of entertainment orientation is compensatory. It would be interesting to know who watches more television: single or married people, religious or irreligious individuals, those with higher or lower work satisfaction, more or less education, better or poorer self-conceptions.

While the demand for celebrities and their multiplication is integral to mass culture and its efforts to meet the demand for entertainment it is also rooted in a diminished capacity to differentiate between what and who does and does not deserve admiration. There is a connection between the contemporary American aversion (especially among the educated) to being “judgmental” and the worship of celebrities of dubious or non-existing accomplishments. The inroads this cultural relativism has made are well illustrated by trends in both higher and lower education over the past decades. The derogatory notion of “elitism” that developed over this period is a natural counterpart of cultural relativism and cultural egalitarianism. Increasingly colleges and schools wish to entertain and please their “customers” rather than impose a curriculum and rigorous standards. Most recently these trends found expression in the new and enthusiastically embraced policies of many high schools across the nation which dispense with required

readings and instead allow students to choose what they wish to read. Apparently the new policy is being adopted in desperation to induce students to read *anything* given the difficulties to motivate them to read the books selected by their teachers. The new policy implies that even reading trash is better than not reading anything.

Celebrity worship lends new meaning to the concept of decadence. In the final analysis this worship is a byproduct of the least gratifying aspects of modernity, namely cultural relativism, extreme individualism, social isolation, rootlessness, excessive mobility (both social and geographic) and the fear of boredom that generates the search for entertainment. A comparison of celebrity worship with hero worship highlights the cultural malaise celebrity worship entails. As Hillary Mantel pointed out in the *New York Review of Books*:

More than any generation before us we command the resources for self-realization...But do we want to be artists, philosophers, pioneers of the natural sciences? No: we want to be celebrities.

We dream of instant, global fame. We expect it to enrich us, gratify us, but are less concerned that it outlasts us.

Celebrities rarely embody the human qualities which at other times inspired hero worship: courage, integrity, selflessness, kindness, creativity, and wisdom. Instead,

celebrities provide transient entertainment and misplaced identification with individuals of questionable substance—their worship is a substitute for solid and durable social bonds, sustaining values and a well grounded sense of purpose.

Further Reading

- Boorstin, D. J. 1961. *The image: A guide to pseudo-events in America*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Hollander, P. 2009. “Our society and its celebrities” and “Watching celebrities” in *The Only Super Power*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Jaffe, A. 2006. *Modernism and the culture of celebrity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marshall, P. D. (Ed.). 2006. *The celebrity reader*. New York: Routledge.
- “Students Get New Reading Assignments: Pick Books you Like.” 2009. *New York Times*. August 30.
- “The Celebrity 100—Special Report.” 2007. *Forbes Magazine*, June 14.

Paul Hollander is professor emeritus of sociology at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies of Harvard University. He is the author or editor of fourteen books.

Copyright of Society is the property of Springer Science & Business Media B.V. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.