Understanding CELEBRITY

GRAEME TURNER

SECOND EDITION

⑤SAGE

1 Understanding Celebrity

The familiar stranger is by no means unprecedented in history. People have long imagined a world populated by figures who were not physically at hand and yet seemed somehow present. What has changed, of course, is the magnitude of the flow, the range of characters that enter our world, their omnipresence, the sheer number of stories. Inevitably, today's stories are but prologues or sequels to other stories, true and less true stories, stories that are themselves intermissions, stories without end. (Gitlin, 2001: 22)

CELEBRITY TODAY

What are the conditions of celebrity today? The contemporary celebrity will usually have emerged from the sports or entertainment industries, they will be highly visible through the media, and their private life will attract greater public interest than their professional life. Unlike that of, say, public officials, the celebrity's fame does not necessarily depend on the position or achievements that gave them their prominence in the first instance. Rather, once they are established, their fame is likely to have outstripped the claims to prominence developed within that initial location. Indeed, the modern celebrity may claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention; think, for instance, of the prominence gained for short, intense periods by the contestants on *Big Brother* or *Survivor*, or even the more sustained public visibility of Kim Kardashian. As a result, and as the example of Kim Kardashian might suggest, most media pundits would argue that celebrities in the twenty-first century excite a level of public interest that seems, for one reason or another, disproportionate. While those who have studied this phenomenon might well argue that this excessiveness constitutes an intrinsic element of the celebrity's appeal, it is also one reason why celebrity is so often regarded as the epitome of the inauthenticity or constructedness of mass-mediated popular culture (Franklin, 1997).

As the epigraph at the top of this chapter suggests, it is the pervasiveness of celebrity across the modern mass media that encourages us to think of it

as a new development, rather than simply the extension of a long-standing condition. The exorbitance of celebrity's contemporary cultural visibility is unprecedented, and the role that the celebrity plays across many aspects of the cultural field has certainly expanded and multiplied in recent years. We are still debating, however, what constitutes celebrity – how precisely to describe and understand this phenomenon. Properly assessing the scale and provenance of celebrity – as a discursive category, as a commercial commodity, as the object of consumption – is a process that is now well under way, but there are still many definitional issues to be clarified. In this chapter, I want to continue this process through a discussion of some key debates: around the definitions and taxonomies of celebrity; the history of the production of celebrity; and the social function of celebrity.
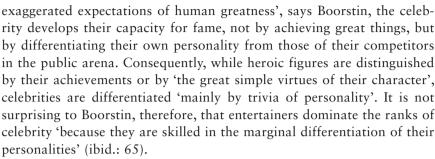
WHAT IS CELEBRITY?

Let's consider some options. First, commentary in the popular media by columnists and other public intellectuals tends to regard the modern celebrity as a symptom of a worrying cultural shift: towards a culture that privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational.[1] Second, those who consume and invest in celebrity tend to describe it as an innate or 'natural' quality, which is possessed only by some extraordinary individuals and 'discovered' by industry talent scouts. For the popular press, the fanzines, the television and movie industries, the defining qualities of the celebrity are both natural and magical: journalists, feature writers and publicists speak of their 'presence', their 'star quality', and their 'charisma'. Third, and in striking contrast to this, the academic literature, particularly from within cultural and media studies, has tended to focus on celebrity as the product of a number of cultural and economic processes. These include the commodification of the individual celebrity through promotion, publicity and advertising; the implication of celebrities in the processes through which cultural identity is negotiated and formed; and most importantly, the representational strategies employed by the media in their treatment of prominent individuals. The sum of these processes constitutes a celebrity *industry*, and it is important that cultural studies' accounts of celebrity deal with its production as a fundamental structural component of how the media operate at the moment. In this section, I want to touch on aspects of these broad approaches to the nature and function of celebrity.

Daniel Boorstin is responsible for one of the most widely quoted aphorisms about celebrity: 'the celebrity is a person who is well-known for their well-knownness' (1971: 58). 'Fabricated on purpose to satisfy our

exaggerated expectations of human greatness', says Boorstin, the celebrity develops their capacity for fame, not by achieving great things, but by differentiating their own personality from those of their competitors in the public arena. Consequently, while heroic figures are distinguished by their achievements or by 'the great simple virtues of their character', celebrities are differentiated 'mainly by trivia of personality'. It is not surprising to Boorstin, therefore, that entertainers dominate the ranks of celebrity 'because they are skilled in the marginal differentiation of their personalities' (ibid.: 65).

Boorstin's account was enclosed within a critique that accused contemporary American culture (the first edition was published in 1961) of a fundamental inauthenticity, as it was increasingly dominated by the media's presentation of what he calls the 'pseudo event'. This is an event planned and staged entirely for the media, which accrues significance through the scale of its media coverage rather than through any more disinterested assessment of its importance. The celebrity, in turn, is its human equivalent: the 'human pseudo event', fabricated for the media and evaluated in terms of the scale and effectiveness of their media visibility (ibid.: 57).

Drawing such a close relationship between the celebrity and the inauthenticity of contemporary popular culture interprets celebrity as a symptom of cultural change. Preceding arguments about postmodernity by several decades, but driven by the opposite of postmodernism's reputed relativism, Boorstin describes a culture impelled by its fascination with the image, the simulation, and losing its grounding in substance or reality. While this concern is clearly genuine and shared by many, one has to recognise that elite critiques of movements in popular culture have taken this kind of stand from the beginning. Each new shift in fashion is offered as the end of civilisation as we know it, with the underlying motivation being an elitist distaste for the demotic or populist dimension of mass cultural practices. So, there is a limit to how helpful this is to those who might want to understand popular cultural forms and practices. John Storey reminded me, in his preface to *Inventing Popular Culture*, of Raymond Williams' comment in *Culture and Society* that 'we live in an expanding culture, yet we spend much of our energy regretting the fact, rather than seeking to understand its nature and conditions' (Storey, 2003: xii). That seems to be an accurate reflection on the weakness of the tradition of commentary and analysis I have used Boorstin to represent, and the importance of investigating alternatives.

Boorstin's is far from the only position, of course, from which we might read the modern celebrity as representative of a significant shift in contemporary popular culture. There is the more disinterested and less moralistic proposition that the modern phenomenon of celebrity reflects

an ontological shift in popular culture. This constitutes a change in the way cultural meanings are generated as the celebrity becomes a key site of media attention and personal aspiration, as well as one of the key places where cultural meanings are negotiated and organised (Marshall, 1997: 72–3). In the more sociological accounts, this shift is evaluated in terms of a net cultural loss – customarily, a loss of community as human relations attenuate and fragment under the pressure of contemporary political and social conditions. As a result of such conditions, the argument goes, there is an affective deficit in modern life. Some of our closest social relations seem to be in decline: the nuclear family, the extended family and the withdrawal of the family unit from the wider suburban community, are among the symptoms we might name. The diminution of direct social relations is addressed by what has been called para-social interactions (that is, interactions which occur across a significant social distance – with people 'we don't know'), such as those we enjoy with the celebrities we watch and admire (Rojek, 2001: 52). Among our compensations for the loss of community is an avid attention to the figure of the celebrity and a greater investment in our relations with specific versions of this figure. In effect, we are using celebrity as a means of constructing a new dimension of community through the media.

Both Chris Rojek (2001; 2012) and John Frow (1998) suggest that the cultural function of the celebrity today contains significant parallels with the functions normally ascribed to religion. ('Is Elvis a god?' asks Frow, and on many of the criteria that he lists the answer has to be 'Yes'.) Both have elaborated quite detailed comparisons of the qualities attributed to particular celebrities and to religious figures, as well as of the kinds of spiritual experiences provided for audiences of fans on the one hand and congregations of believers on the other. In his most recent book, Rojek links 'the commodified magnetism' that celebrities possess with a performance culture that routinely 'trades in motifs of unity, ecstasy and transcendence'. In general, he argues in *Fame Attack*, 'religiosity permeates the production, exchange and consumption of celebrity culture' (2012: 121).

Viewed from such a perspective, the attributes of celebrity are held to be imminent in the individual concerned: Elvis's celebrity, in such a context, is the popular recognition of the inherent qualities of this extraordinary individual. Here the discourses of religion seem to coincide with those of the media industries that produce celebrity. The popular view that celebrity is a natural, immanent quality to which the media industries give expression obviously legitimates the interests of the industries concerned as well as consoling those who consume their products as objects of belief, desire or aspiration. And yet, it is important to recognise that such a definition of

celebrity is countervailed by equally popular media discourses that empha-sise its phoniness and constructedness. While many stories of individual success might suggest that the individual's 'star quality' has shone through, many others will insist that their achievements are simply the effect of blind good luck, and that 'star quality' has little to do with it. The appeal of such stories explicitly does not lie in the reader's admiration or respect for the celebrity figure or for the process that produces them.[2]

It is increasingly clear that it is the detail that matters as we develop an understanding of the roles played by celebrities within popular culture. Richard Dyer's work (1979; 1986) has been highly influential as a result of his close attention to the detail of the film star as a cultural text, and his concern with contextualising these texts within the discursive and ideologi-cal conditions that have enabled the specific star's ascendancy. Dyer describes the film stars he examines as socially grounded, overdetermined by the historical conditions within which they are produced; conversely, he also gives due weight to the contingency and specificity of the meanings generated by the particular star in relation to their audiences. Dyer's description of the semiotics of film stars found that their social meanings were not only deposited there by repeated representations and perfor-mances, but that they were also the product of complex relations between the kind of individuality the star signified and that valued (or, alternatively, problematised) by the society. As a result, the story Dyer tells about the meanings embedded in the image of Marilyn Monroe is not only a story of the professional cultivation of her persona as a star, but also of the discur-sive and ideological context within which that persona could develop.

Probably the next conceptual shift in the development of definitions of celebrity, and one which moves us a little closer to the contexts of its pro-duction, comes from Joshua Gamson's *Claims to Fame* (1994). Gamson's work is most significant for its focus on the workings of the industries that churn these products out, and for what he is able to tell us about the specific meanings and pleasures derived from them by particular groups of fans and their audiences. There is a wealth of empirical detail in his book too, of which we will be making more use in later chapters.

There was an increased concentration of interest in defining celebrity over the late 1990s and early 2000s, focused around a number of books which have been important in setting the terms for a celebrity studies that differentiated itself from the studies of the film star – that is, the kind of celebrity studies we most commonly see now. *Celebrity and Power* (Marshall, 1997), *Illusions of Immortality* (Giles, 2000), *Fame Games* (Turner, Bonner and Marshall, 2000) and *Celebrity* (Rojek, 2001) are among them. The common tactic here was to emphasise that celebrity is not

'a property of specific individuals. Rather, it is constituted discursively, by the way in which the individual is represented' (Turner et al., 2000: 11). For Rojek, celebrity is the consequence of the 'attribution' of qualities to a particular individual through the mass media (Rojek, 2001: 10), while for David Giles, fame is a 'process', a consequence of the way individuals are treated by the media:

> The brutal reality of the modern age is that all famous people are treated like celebrities by the mass media, whether they be a great political figure, a worthy campaigner, an artist 'touched by genius', a serial killer or Maureen of *Driving School* [one of the participants in a British reality TV program]. The newspapers and television programs responsible for their publicity do not draw any meaningful distinction between *how* they are publicised. (2000: 5)

While we might protest that meaningful distinctions do remain – between, for instance, how stardom is constructed in the cinema, or how we understand the television personality (Bennett, 2011), or the notoriety of the serial killer (Schmid, 2006) – the general point that Giles is making seems to be a fair one. Politicians, television performers, pop stars and the latest evictee from the *Big Brother* house, all seem to be integrated into more or less the same 'publicity regimes and fame-making apparatus' (Langer, 1998: 53). Modern celebrity, then, is overwhelmingly a product of media representation; understanding it demands giving close attention to the representational repertoires and patterns employed in this discursive regime.

In practice, the discursive regime of celebrity is defined by a number of elements. It crosses the boundary between the public and the private worlds, preferring the personal, the private or 'veridical' self (Rojek, 2001: 11) as the privileged object of revelation. We can map the precise moment a public figure becomes a celebrity. It occurs at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives. Paradoxically, it is often the high profile achieved by their public activities that provides the alibi for this process of 'celebritisation'. Conversely, the celebrity's general claim on public attention can easily outstrip the public awareness of their original achievements. Hence we can have a journalist-cum-talk-show host such as Geraldo Rivera who is 'famous for who they are instead of what they report' (Shepard, 1999: 82), or an actor such as Lindsay Lohan whose mediatised notoriety is now out of all proportion to her professional achievements. Longstanding celebrities (even highly successful film stars such as Jack Nicholson) can outlive the memory of their original claims to fame as being famous becomes a career in itself.
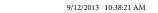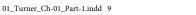
None of this is simple, of course. The discourses in play within the media representation of celebrity are highly contradictory and ambivalent: celebrities are extraordinary or they are 'just like us'; they deserve their success or they 'just got lucky'; they are objects of desire and emulation, or they are provocations for derision and contempt; they are genuine down-to-earth people or they are complete phonies (or, in the case of Michael Jackson towards the end of his life, just plain 'wacko'). The territories of desire explored by the representation of celebrities are complex, too. Our fascination with particular celebrities is on the one hand a fantastic projection, but on the other hand we *can* actually encounter them in everyday life. Gamson's descriptions of the fans queuing up to watch celebrities arrive at red-carpet events, and Rojek's discussion of the disruptive effect of the 'out-of-face' encounter (when we accidentally meet a celebrity in *their* everyday life, doing the shopping or crossing the street), suggest how these encounters with the object of one's fantasy can inject significance, even desire, into our own everyday lives. As we will see in Chapter 3, this possibility is now dramatically enhanced by the capacities of social media, where the fan can indeed communicate directly with their favourite celebrity via, for instance, Twitter.

There is one point that largely gets lost in most discussions of celebrity, however. While it is reasonable to think of the discursive regime within which celebrity is represented as more or less the same across the range of media, it is necessary to recognise that the pleasures and identifications on offer to consumers of certain media products can vary markedly. The shock at Princess Diana's death may well stem from an affection that is not dissimilar to that which we might feel for an actual acquaintance, and constitutes a form of empathic identification. The fascination with nude celebrities, exploited by such magazines as *Celebrity Flesh* or such websites as *Hollywood Whores*, is not like that at all. Sitting uncomfortably close to the porn sites merely one click away, the nude celebrity websites have rarely been the subject of any discussion or inquiry (although see Knee, 2006); the overwhelmingly gendered, and often misogynistic, character of this domain of celebrity demands more attention. (There is some discussion of this in Chapter 6.)

Of course, it is important to emphasise how sophisticated the media's production of celebrity has now become. As I will argue in Chapter 3, over the 1990s, the celebrity turned into such an important commodity that it became a greatly expanded area for content development by the media itself. Today, in a much more highly convergent media environment, where cross-media and cross-platform content and promotion has become the norm, the manufacture of and trade in celebrity has become a commercial

strategy for media organisations of all kinds and not just the promotions and publicity sectors. Network and cable television, in particular, has demonstrated its ability to produce celebrity from nothing – without any need to establish the individual's ability, skill, or extraordinariness, as the precondition for public attention. The phenomenon of *Big Brother* made that clear, initially, and the global success of reality TV formats of all kinds has been built upon that foundation.

Usefully, this helps to remind us that celebrity is not only a discursive effect but also a commodity, one that is produced, traded and marketed by the media and publicity industries. In this context, its primary function is commercial and promotional. Indeed, quite early on, Andrew Wernick, in *Promotional Culture*, defined the 'star' solely in such terms: 'A star is anyone whose name and fame has been built up to the point where reference to them, via mention, mediatized representation or live appearance, can serve as a promotional booster in itself' (1991: 106). In such a formulation, the celebrity is defined instrumentally, in terms of the role they play within the operation of the mass media, promotion and publicity industries.
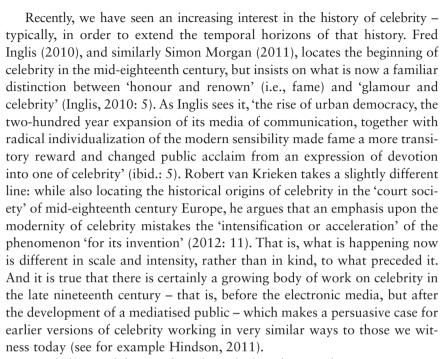
To move towards a definition, then: celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand. Increasingly, as we shall see in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, it is implicated in debates about how identities are constructed in contemporary cultures, and about how the individual self is culturally defined.

PICTURE PERSONALITIES, STARS AND CELEBRITIES

Leo Braudy is one of relatively few to have addressed contemporary celebrity culture by insisting on its continuity with much earlier versions of fame. In *The Frenzy of Renown* (1986), Braudy writes a 'history of fame' that begins in early Roman times and argues that the desire for fame has been a fundamental component of western societies over many centuries. For him, the history of fame provides us with an angle of inspection onto what it means to be an individual, and onto society's shifting definition of achievement, at various points in time (1986: 10). Nevertheless, he acknowledges that modern fame has experienced a degree of inflation as a result of post-Renaissance conceptions of the individual, the collapse of monarchic or religious systems of privilege or distinction in the face of democratisation, and the spread of mass communication. However, these are differences of degree, rather than of substance, in his opinion.

Recently, we have seen an increasing interest in the history of celebrity – typically, in order to extend the temporal horizons of that history. Fred Inglis (2010), and similarly Simon Morgan (2011), locates the beginning of celebrity in the mid-eighteenth century, but insists on what is now a familiar distinction between 'honour and renown' (i.e., fame) and 'glamour and celebrity' (Inglis, 2010: 5). As Inglis sees it, 'the rise of urban democracy, the two-hundred year expansion of its media of communication, together with radical individualization of the modern sensibility made fame a more transitory reward and changed public acclaim from an expression of devotion into one of celebrity' (ibid.: 5). Robert van Krieken takes a slightly different line: while also locating the historical origins of celebrity in the 'court society' of mid-eighteenth century Europe, he argues that an emphasis upon the modernity of celebrity mistakes the 'intensification or acceleration' of the phenomenon 'for its invention' (2012: 11). That is, what is happening now is different in scale and intensity, rather than in kind, to what preceded it. And it is true that there is certainly a growing body of work on celebrity in the late nineteenth century – that is, before the electronic media, but after the development of a mediatised public – which makes a persuasive case for earlier versions of celebrity working in very similar ways to those we witness today (see for example Hindson, 2011).

Nonetheless, and despite also taking the long historical view to contextualise the situation in the twentieth century, Chris Rojek is perhaps speaking for the dominant position when he insists on the fundamental modernity of celebrity: he describes it as 'a phenomenon of mass-circulation newspapers, TV, radio and film' (2001: 16). There are many justifications for such a claim. Some are related to the development of new media technologies. Gamson, for instance, points to the significance of the development of photography as a technology, offering apparently unmediated access to the events represented in the newspaper, while also lending new importance to the representation of the individual. As a consequence of photography's increasing employment in the print media, Gamson argues, the 'dissemination of the face' displaced the dissemination of ideas, laying the ground for the 'publicizing of people' (1994: 21). Further in this vein, Alexander Walker has pointed to the importance of the film close-up, that most individualising of techniques, which offered a new kind of spectacle to the mass audience, exciting new forms of desire (Walker, 1970: 21).

Like Rojek, I am inclined to the standard view – which is that the growth of celebrity is historically linked to the spread of the mass media (particularly the visual media). Increasingly too, as Rojek's *Fame Attack* (2012) argues at length, it is also connected to the invention of public relations and the growth of the promotions and publicity industries from the beginning

of the twentieth century.[3] In fact, Schickel argues, the development of these industries made celebrity a necessary invention:

> [D]uring the period – roughly 1895–1920 – when the first blocks of the modern celebrity system were sliding into place everything was improvisatory, primitive. Something more was needed, something that could, on a fairly regular basis, provide the public with a reliable supply of sensations together with an equally steady, glamorous, and easy-to-follow real-life serial adventure. Something that could, as well, allow the press to return to a slightly more passive role in gathering and presenting the news of these creatures, not force it constantly to risk its reputation in prodigies of invention. (Schickel, 1985: 33–4)

Richard Schickel is perhaps most categoric in his uncompromising claim that 'there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century' (ibid.: 21). Before that, he suggests, we had people who were successful and therefore famous. That changed, he argues, on 24 June 1916, when Mary Pickford signed the first million dollar film contract with Adolph Zukor:

> It was at the moment this deal made headlines that reward began to detach itself from effort and from intrinsic merit, when the old reasonable correlation between what (and how) one did and what one received for doing it became tenuous (and, in the upper reaches of show biz, invisible). (Schickel, 1985: 47)

There are other contenders for the pivotal moment, of course, although most nominate a point in the first two decades of the American motion picture industry, when competition between independent producers was intense and new strategies were being sought to market their products. Film historians like to cite what is usually regarded as the first occasion when publicity is deliberately manipulated in order to build interest in a star. In 1910, producer Carl Laemmle (so the story goes) planted a false story in a St Louis newspaper that reported Florence Lawrence – an actress then known as 'the Biograph Girl' – had been killed in a trolley-car accident. Laemmle immediately denounced the story as a fake and staged a highly public appearance where Lawrence was mobbed by her 'relieved and allegedly adoring public' (Schickel, 1985: 37).

  Neal Gabler's biography of newspaper columnist Walter Winchell suggests yet another point of origin and locates it where the representations of the private life of celebrities were first developed, in the modern newspaper:

> In 1925, at a time when the editors of most newspapers were reluctant to publish even something as inoffensive as the notice of an impending birth for fear of crossing the boundaries of good taste, Winchell introduced a revolutionary column that reported who was romancing whom, who was cavorting

with gangsters, who was ill or dying, who was suffering financial difficulties, which spouses were having affairs, which couples were about to divorce, and dozens of other secrets, peccadilloes and imbroglios that had previously been concealed from public view. In doing so, he not only broke a long standing taboo; he suddenly, and singlehandedly expanded the purview of American journalism. (1995: xii)

Gabler's contextualisation of Winchell supports his view that the high profile journalist had 'helped inaugurate a new mass culture of celebrity':

… centred only on New York and Hollywood and Washington, fixated on personalities, promulgated by the media, predicated on publicity, dedicated to the ephemeral and grounded on the principle that notoriety confers power. This culture would bind to an increasingly diverse, mobile and atomised nation until *it* became, in many respects, America's dominant ethos, celebrity consciousness our new common denominator. (ibid.: xiii)

Boorstin also located a shift in the content in popular magazines that takes place in the early 1920s. Looking at mass circulation magazines such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*, he noted that 74 per cent of the 'subjects of biographical interest' appearing in their pages in five sample years between 1901 and 1914 came from 'politics, business and the professions'. After 1922, however, 'well over half of them came from the world of entertainment' (1971: 59). Marshall (1997), similarly, tells us that the demand for celebrity material produced a brand new sector of special interest publications during this period. 'Celebrity itself', he says, 'generated an entire industry by the second decade of the twentieth century with the emergence of movie fan magazines (*Moving Picture World*, later followed by *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen* and *Silver Screen*) that openly celebrated movie stars and their lives' (1997: 8).

Of course, a phenomenon as culturally pervasive as celebrity must have numerous points of origin, numerous points of change. The clearest location at which we might start to chart its various histories, however, seems to be the American motion picture industry at the beginning of the twentieth century. Incorporating the residue of the press agentry networks developed around live theatre and vaudeville, and seeking a means of industrialising the marketing of their new product – the narrative feature film – the nascent American film industry experiences a number of significant shifts that result in the marketing of the 'picture personality' and, later on, 'the star'.

Initially, motion pictures did not include cast lists and actors were not promoted as identities independent of the roles they played on film. The change in these practices around 1910 has been the subject of an extensive
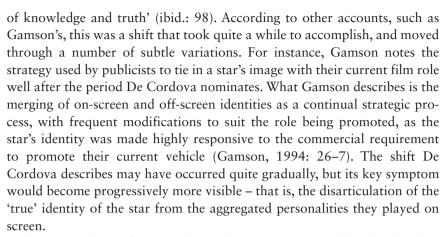
historiographic debate.[4] It seems that a number of determinants were in play. Initially, it may have been that the actors themselves were reluctant to advertise their involvement in case it tainted their reputations as dramatic performers in live theatre, or it may have been the studios' fear that promoting individual actors would give them a degree of market power that would ultimately cost the producers money. Or it may simply have been that the studios were unaware that the personalities on display were potentially more powerful drawcards than the narratives to which they contributed their performances. De Cordova traces these issues through his account of the 'picture personalities' (the phrase used at the time) that emerged once the producers began to include a cast list and to credit individual performers. De Cordova's description of its deployment suggests that the phrase is quite accurate in its focus on the production of a performer's personality through the promotional discourses available at the time:

> Personality existed as an effect of the representation of character in a film – or, more accurately, as an effect of the representation of character across a number of films. It functioned primarily to ascribe a unity to the actor's various appearances in films. However, although personality was primarily an effect of the representation of character within films, the illusion that it had its basis outside the film was consistently maintained. (1990: 86)

We can see here the early basis for the privileging of the private self ('the personality') as the object of publicity that is characteristic of contemporary celebrity. Its commercial function in these early days was to build an interest in the individual performer and a desire to see them perform the same personality repeatedly on the screen in new productions. Thus it was important to maintain a tight fit between the personality constructed on the screen and the personality constructed through the promotional discourses:

> … discourse about the player's existence outside of the films emerged merely as an extension of the existence already laid out within the films. The illusion that was operative was that the player's real personality (as represented in magazines) preceded and caused the representation of personality on the screen. (ibid.: 87–8)

This formation of the picture personality did not last long, however. By 1914, De Cordova argues, a shift had begun to occur in the promotional discourse that would take us from the picture personality – where the personality was a coherent construct promotionally integrated with the screen performances – to the star: 'With the emergence of the star, the question of the player's existence outside his or her work in film became the primary focus of discourse. The private lives of the players were constituted as a site

of knowledge and truth' (ibid.: 98). According to other accounts, such as Gamson's, this was a shift that took quite a while to accomplish, and moved through a number of subtle variations. For instance, Gamson notes the strategy used by publicists to tie in a star's image with their current film role well after the period De Cordova nominates. What Gamson describes is the merging of on-screen and off-screen identities as a continual strategic process, with frequent modifications to suit the role being promoted, as the star's identity was made highly responsive to the commercial requirement to promote their current vehicle (Gamson, 1994: 26–7). The shift De Cordova describes may have occurred quite gradually, but its key symptom would become progressively more visible – that is, the disarticulation of the 'true' identity of the star from the aggregated personalities they played on screen.

This carried significant industrial consequences. While the development of the star turned the individual into a commodity to be marketed and traded with greater freedom and flexibility by the industry, it also gave that star access to a new kind of power. They could now construct a relationship with their audience that was independent of the vehicles in which they appeared. With this shift, the individual star had a personal and professional interest in promoting themselves – and not just the latest product in which they had played a role – through the media. Hence we have the constitution of a new source of information for the media and a new means of constructing an identity through the media. Conversely, while the cultural prominence of the stars massively accelerated over the next few years, this created its own problems – even for those who originally stood to profit from this acceleration the most. The studios now had to manage a media presence that had its own personal and professional interests to pursue, while maintaining the commercial value of the star commodity they had helped to create. In some cases – the Fatty Arbuckle scandal, for instance, or the tangled mess of relationships involving Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford – this raised serious issues for the industry's social acceptability.

As the picture personality gave way to the star, a new tier of promotion, publicity and image management entered the media industries. David Marshall (1997) talks about the film star as the apotheosis of the ideologies of individualism he sees embedded in celebrity in general and possibly as the most empowered individual category of celebrity he examines. His discussion of film celebrity emphasises the centrality of freedom, independence and individualism in the discourses used to construct the film star, as well as the commercial significance of the independence of the relationship between the star and their audience. This independence, of course, required

management by a third party in most cases – hence the advent of the agent to the business – but this was a third party who was employed by the stars themselves. For successful film stars, celebrity carried a certain amount of power and autonomy as long as it was managed well.

What was crucial here, as Marshall also points out following the lead of Richard Dyer, was the fact that these stars' celebrity had a particular content. In the celebration of their American Dream lifestyles and the media's elaboration of the trappings of their success, Hollywood stars provided a 'wedding of consumer culture with democratic aspirations' (Marshall, 1997: 9). Dyer's work throughout the 1970s and 1980s (1979, 1986), as well as Marshall's own *Celebrity and Power* (1997), is devoted substantially to explaining the comprehensiveness with which western cultures have accepted the film star as a form of public personality with whom they identify, in whom they invest and maintain a personal interest, and to whom is ascribed a value that is cultural or social rather than merely economic.

The development of celebrity in fields other than cinema has its own histories of course and, in some cases, the cultural content they carry is significantly different too. However, and notwithstanding the influence now exerted by the representation of celebrities from a range of industrial locations – sport, popular music, television – in the print media and on television, the development of the film star is perhaps the most elaborate and socially grounded instance of the broad phenomenon of modern celebrity. There are limits to its usefulness as an exemplary case, though. It remains distinctive because of its complex capacity so far to maintain a relationship between the star's celebrity – which mostly insists on their separateness from the person on the screen – and the films in which they have appeared. The film star, even iconic performers such as Clint Eastwood, is continually drawing attention to what they do as a performance and will talk of their careers in terms of a 'body of work'. This is not so much the case with, for instance, the television celebrity. John Langer (1981), many years ago, proposed such a distinction: that film created stars, while television created personalities. Stars develop their reputation by playing someone else. In some cases, these performances retain aspects of a consistently constructed public identity (as with Arnold Schwarzenegger, for instance), while in other cases, the star is known for their ability to submerge their public identity completely in the role being played (as is typical of Robert De Niro, Cate Blanchett, or Johnny Depp). In television, much more categorically, this latter effect is not meant to occur. Personalities simply perform (what the audience sees as) themselves, and the more seamlessly the better (although, as James

Bennett reminds us [2011], this apparent seamlessness is only achieved through the application of a high degree of professionalism and skill). Indeed, one of the key attributes of the television personality is their ability to appear to eliminate the distance between their performance and themselves. They also operate within a different semiotic economy. Stars seem to be able to continually accrue meanings through successive appearances: television personalities, by contrast, are in danger of exhausting the meanings they generate by continually drawing upon them in order to perform at all.

I think Langer's remains a useful distinction (*pace* Bennett, 2011) particularly when we reflect on its parallel with De Cordova's history of the picture personality in early Hollywood – where promotional discourse attempted to construct a close correlation between the performance on screen and the discursive construction of a private self. Television would seem to be replicating that approach in the strategies it uses to promote some of its personalities today, with the marketing of *Survivor* and other reality television formats only the most recent instances of its deployment. That said, it is also true that the distinction between the film star and the television personality looks much less relevant now than it once did: when, for instance, we see how radically the arrival of the reality television celebrity has changed the landscape. As Frances Bonner has argued, the distinctions that Langer proposed have lost some of their pertinence 'as celebrity culture has become so large a part of our mediated culture' in general (2011: 75). Furthermore, television's centrality to celebrity culture has increased – through the rise of the reality TV celebrity, and as it has converged with other media platforms. There is also the criticism that James Bennett makes of Langer's account of the television personality: it implies that television produces 'a form of celebrity that is inferior to other realms' (ibid.:15) or that 'stardom' is simply not possible on television – something directly challenged by Alice Leppert and Julie Wilson's useful (2011) discussion of *The Hills*' Lauren Conrad as the first reality TV 'star'. Bennett's book is aimed, then, at rethinking the specificity of television in the context of the current formations of celebrity culture, and at understanding the different ways in which television celebrity is produced and circulated – something that the rich body of work now being produced on reality TV is also concerned with investigating.

To complete this section, it would be appropriate to talk about the migration of celebrity online to celebrity websites, to blogs, chatrooms and fansites, and to social media such as Twitter. However, I am going to deal with the online celebrity at some length in Chapter 3, and again in Chapter 6, so I will defer that discussion until then.
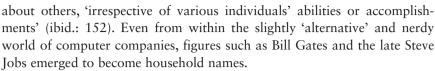
THE SPREAD OF CELEBRITY CULTURE

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, it is the pervasiveness of celebrity culture that marks out the contemporary version. Discourses of celebrity invade all kinds of sites today: from contests in shopping malls looking for pre-teen celebrity look-alikes, to the management of major political campaigns. All demonstrate the importance of publicity, promotion and the exploitation of the media event. Boorstin noted that the pseudo event had been part of American politics since the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Many regarded the election of Ronald Reagan as the point where the production lines of celebrity and politics most emphatically converged in the USA, but the election of Barack Obama is an even more dramatic case. In the UK, accounts of the prominence of 'spin' – the tireless management of the media's access to and deployment of information – in preparing the way for the election of Tony Blair's 'New Labour', became the accepted explanation for the comprehensiveness of the Tories' defeats in successive elections. Indeed, when Blair began to experience a backlash at a number of public events during 2002, in what was the precursor to the collapse of his electoral support, this was widely regarded as a response to the perceived influence of public relations 'spin doctors' driving principles out of politics altogether.

In business, Rakesh Khurana (2003) has chronicled what he describes as the 'irrational quest for charismatic CEOs': the 1980s break with the traditions of managerial capitalism that resulted in swashbuckling CEOs leading the businesses of the 1990s – and this has continued into the present. Where once, some can still remember, the individuality of the professional manager had been subordinated in exchange for the security of their place in the corporate hierarchy, the more volatile industrial environment of the 'new economy' increasingly sought its salvation in 'charismatic authority' (what Khurana describes as 'celebrity CEOs' [2003: 168–72]). The development of celebrity became a commercial asset in the business world, just as it was in the entertainment industries, and in figures such as Donald Trump and Alan Sugar, the two sectors merged through the alchemy of reality television (both became stars of the reality TV game-doc *The Apprentice* in, respectively, the US and UK versions). It is now relatively common for the CEOs of major companies to appear on television hawking their company's products, on magazine covers and in newspaper features promoting themselves, and to employ ghost writers to produce self-serving autobiographies. Within their own industry, in particular, celebrity fed upon itself. As Khurana describes it, in the labour market for CEOs in America at the time, 'stories, gossip, and legends' about the 'charismatic' executive simply travelled farther than those

about others, 'irrespective of various individuals' abilities or accomplishments' (ibid.: 152). Even from within the slightly 'alternative' and nerdy world of computer companies, figures such as Bill Gates and the late Steve Jobs emerged to become household names.

In 1991 Andrew Wernick published a highly critical diagnosis of contemporary western culture that claimed it was dominated by the processes of publicity and promotion. Originating in a critique of the pervasiveness of the practice of advertising and its underlying ideologies, Wernick's book accused contemporary commercial popular culture of a generic 'bad faith'. For him, the influence of advertising and its commercial logics had resulted in the phoney, the constructed and the simulated taking over the cultural landscape.[5] John Hartley, coming from a very different angle in that his view of contemporary popular culture vigorously rejects the elite critique of the popular, also acknowledged the pervasive influence of promotional discourse within contemporary popular culture. He went so far as to coin a term, 'the smiling professions', for the range of occupations, functions and personnel employed in the broad fields of the media, publicity and promotion (1992: Chapter 5). However, unlike Wernick, Hartley argued that, far from publicity being an enemy of 'the public', it was through publicity that 'the public' actually came into being. Publicity, for Hartley, became one of the fundamental enabling components in the construction of contemporary public culture, and 'the smiling professions' its primary functionaries:

> [T]here is a new development in the history of looking: the public has slipped, perhaps decisively, from the disciplinary grasp of educational and governmental authorities into the gentler hands of the smiling professions. Smiling has become one of the most important public virtues of our times, a uniform that must be worn on the lips of those whose social function it is to create, sustain, tutor, represent and make images of the public – to call it into discursive being. (1992: 121–2)

As a result, 'in a market where years of experience can be outbid by a squirt of hairspray, it is not learning but looks, not the cerebral but celebrity, that mark the winners' (Hartley, 1996: 36). Hartley is not as offended by this as Wernick – rather his project was to achieve an accurate recognition of this situation by journalism educators, so that they might better understand how to educate their students to deal with it.

Hartley's argument usefully reminds us that the spread of celebrity is not just the consequence of an accumulation of publicity handouts, advertisements, chat show interviews, or the shock-horror revelations in the tabloid screamers. The really interesting (and perhaps most surprising) aspect of celebrity is the degree to which it has become integrated into the cultural

processes of our daily lives. As Richard Dyer points out, a 'star's image is also what people say or write about him or her, the way the image is used in other contexts such as advertisements, novels, pop songs, and finally the way the star can become part of the coinage of everyday speech' (1986: 2–3). The celebrity has a generally cultural pervasiveness, as the cultural meanings of and associations with the star leak into all kinds of locations in our daily lives – expanding the range of territories into which the media industries and their 'smiling professionals' now gain (or control) access.
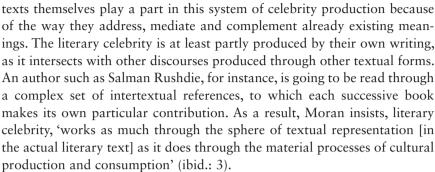
Leo Braudy puts a positive spin on this new exorbitance of celebrity – responding to the human 'urge to be unique' – as he too stresses the contemporary expansion of the possibilities for fame. That fame has been disconnected from achievement seems not to worry him too much either: 'the dream of fame', he says, has always been 'inseparable from the idea of personal freedom'. And so, in a perverse way, the more available fame is, and the less 'deserved' it is, the more it operates as a means of providing a 'personal justification' for the individual's existence (1986: 7). The tight ideological connection between the discourses of celebrity and democracy and their integration into the legitimation of market capitalism that Marshall's work describes, then, is reprocessed by Braudy's account into a productive and consoling feature of contemporary society.

Tempting though these big connections are, they tend to obscure the fact that what constitutes celebrity in one cultural domain may be quite different in another. I have already discussed the specificity of the film star's celebrity, in comparison with that of the television personality. Dyer's work on film stars reflects this, dealing with the particular meanings of individual stars rather than simply citing them as instances of a broadly enacted process of cultural production (1979, 1986). Marshall's 1997 study also, while in some respects not entirely in sympathy with Dyer's, reinforces the importance of distinguishing between different kinds of celebrity in terms of the media through which they are predominantly reproduced and in terms of the industry from which they have emerged. Consequently, while this larger over-determining process is the primary subject of this book, we should not lose sight of the crucial distinctions that remain active within it.

Joe Moran's work on literary celebrity is a good example of how such distinctions might be made. Moran acknowledges that the literary celebrity is indeed subject to the same systemic structures as any other kind, competing for space in the newspapers, television chat shows and so on. He also argues that literary publishing operates 'an elaborate system of representations in its own right, produced and circulated across a wide variety of media' (2000: 3–4). Through case studies of the works and reputations of John Updike, Philip Roth and Kathy Acker, Moran argues that the literary

texts themselves play a part in this system of celebrity production because of the way they address, mediate and complement already existing meanings. The literary celebrity is at least partly produced by their own writing, as it intersects with other discourses produced through other textual forms. An author such as Salman Rushdie, for instance, is going to be read through a complex set of intertextual references, to which each successive book makes its own particular contribution. As a result, Moran insists, literary celebrity, 'works as much through the sphere of textual representation [in the actual literary text] as it does through the material processes of cultural production and consumption' (ibid.: 3).

From one point of view, this may not be significantly different from the processes through which the film star's meanings are accrued. The star's 'work', too, has that inevitably self-referential potential as each successive performance contributes to the story of their career (although they are not usually in the same sense the 'authors' of their own work). Moran's insistence probably reflects the fact that literary fans might like to think of themselves as pursuing an interest in an artist rather than a celebrity, in order to locate themselves on a slightly higher plane of cultural consumption. This is despite the fact that literary festivals, writers' festivals and the like attract mass audiences who behave much like any other kind of fan. They want to see their favourite author in the flesh in order to gain an insight into what they are 'really like' – and maybe buy a t-shirt or get their book autographed. Like other kinds of celebrity, the literary figure will create their prominence through publicity campaigns, interviews on talk shows, in-store book-signings, personal appearances, feature articles in newspapers, press coverage of their private lives, entries in gossip columns, biographies, advertisements, and promotional gimmicks, as well as that whole other dimension of publicity that comes with their being taken up as serious writers within schools and universities.

One area where it is essential to acknowledge some differentiation is sport. The sports star celebrity is a particularly interesting case because, as David Giles (among others) points out, sport is 'one of the few areas of public life that is truly meritocratic': sports stars 'can *prove* they are the best' (2000: 107). Therefore, their cultural prominence can be regarded as deserved. Further, sports stars perform, unequivocally, as themselves. Andrews and Jackson (2001) suggest that where performers in film or television adopt 'fictive identities' to do what they do, sport offers the spectacle of '*real* individuals participating in unpredictable contests'. This creates a veneer of authenticity, they argue, which sets the sports star apart from 'other, more explicitly manufactured, cultural realms' (presumably, such as film or television). The downside here, they also suggest, is that the sports star is therefore especially vulnerable to a drop in their performance, which can result in a

rapid decline in the public's interest in them and thus in their commercial and professional potential (2001: 8). Finally, Gary Whannell (2002) argues, the sports star is especially articulated to discourses of achievement, excellence, and transcendence – often explicitly tied up with definitions of nationality and ethnicity. The quality of what they do matters a great deal, not only to the industry but also, in many instances, to the nation (just ask Michael Phelps, Kevin Pietersen, or David Beckham about that).

On the face of it, the fact that discourses of excellence are so thoroughly embedded within sports would suggest that the sports celebrity does not easily fit the general pattern we are describing. However, while the process through which they come to public attention may be different from that which affects celebrities from other domains, sports stars are certainly subject to the same mass-mediated processes of celebritisation we have been examining. It would be fair to say that the public interest in many high profile sports stars is focused primarily on their private lives, rather than on their sporting achievements. Indeed, there are many examples – David Beckham would be one, Tiger Woods another – where despite a decline in their sporting achievements, sports celebrities are still capable of drawing a crowd, selling a newspaper, attracting hits on a website, or followers on Twitter.

It may be that once we move beyond the processes of production, the differences between the different locations of celebrity do not matter that much. The celebrity may have achieved things that suggest they 'deserve' their eminence, but these are not going to protect that individual from the celebrity process, nor affect how it actually operates over time. Once that process kicks in it has its own logic that, say, Real Madrid's Cristiano Ronaldo must accept while he goes about his business as a footballer. The effects of celebrity simply contribute to the cultural context within which he must ply his trade. David Marshall introduces another dimension to this, however. He organises *Celebrity and Power* (1997) around the assumption that different industries will not only produce their celebrities in different ways, but also that their celebrities will generate different kinds of meanings. He provides accounts of celebrity as it works in cinema, television and the music industry. Through case studies of Tom Cruise, Oprah Winfrey and New Kids on the Block, he compares and contrasts the various organisational systems and regimes of publicity and promotion. He also argues that there are distinct semiotic and discursive regimes built up around the different industrial sites for celebrity. Not only are their celebrities produced through different systems but the meanings they generate also privilege different groups of discourses. According to Marshall's study, the film star is structured through the discourses of individualism, the television personality constructs their celebrity through 'conceptions of familiarity', and the

music star articulates their meanings to discourses of 'authenticity'. Marshall helps us to see the particular meanings and distinctions that are important and valued within that particular media culture and within that community of fans or consumers.

Finally, here, we need to recognise that the development of the internet has dramatically affected the public's capacity to directly participate in, if not control, the processes we have described. Users of the many celebrity gossip sites comment and criticise, remediating content and feeding stories into mainstream news media. In many cases, the comments posted on these sites have minimal legal, regulatory, or even commercial constraints upon them to limit what is said. As we shall see in Chapter 3, while the internet has a major effect on how the mass media celebrities operate and how their personae are collaboratively constructed, it has also created a new domain of 'micro-celebrity' (Senft, 2008) where ordinary people create a web presence and a public persona through blogs and social media such as Twitter. It is true that much of the celebrity constructed within these social networks, and indeed the patterns of micro-celebrity itself, tend to be limited to these networks; however, they do work in ways that mimic larger systems and can from time to time mutate into mainstream celebrity. Nevertheless, celebrity takes on new functions and meanings in these contexts as it is effectively turned into a demotic strategy of identity formation for the people 'formerly known as the audience' (Rosen, 2006).

TAXONOMIES OF FAME

The approach I am developing in this book deals with celebrity as a media process that is coordinated by an industry, and as a commodity or text which is productively consumed by audiences and fans. I don't pretend that this is the only way we can approach the phenomenon. There have been many attempts to deal with celebrity through the analysis of a set of properties associated with the individuals concerned. As a result, there are taxonomies of celebrity – systems that categorise the celebrity in terms of the meanings they generate, or the power they possess, or the political and social determinants responsible for their public profile, and so on. One of the earliest taxonomies is Alberoni's, which distinguishes two kinds of social-political elites. The first is composed of people who possess 'political, economic or religious power', whose decisions 'have an influence on the present and future fortunes of the society which they direct'. The second group is what we now think of as celebrities and they are people 'whose institutional power is very limited or non-existent, but whose doings and way of life arouse a considerable and sometimes even a maximum degree of
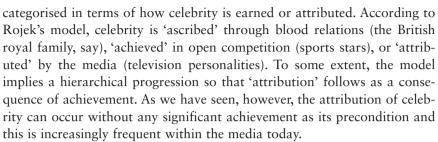
interest' (Alberoni, 1972: 72). Since these individuals do not exercise any institutional influence over the 'lives and future expectations of members of the society', Alberoni describes them as a 'powerless elite'. Marshall (1997) has demonstrated why this underestimates the cultural power possessed by the celebrity, and his argument is also reprised in Turner et al. (2000). Neal Gabler, though, posits an alternative view in his history of Walter Winchell and the American media in the 1920s and 30s, when he says that 'power was really a function not of wealth or breeding or talent or connections but of publicity'. Fame, according to Gabler, actually came to constitute power itself, as 'social authority in the early thirties had been turned on its head: it now derived from the media' (1995: 184–5). There is another dimension to this that Alberoni also misunderstands and therefore discounts. This is precisely what has made celebrity so interesting to us in recent years: its increasing purchase on our experience of everyday life and its implication in the construction and definitions of cultural identity. Taxonomies, in general, share this failing in that they tend to underestimate the importance of the interests of those who consume celebrity, focusing instead on elaborating the character of the celebrity itself.

James Monaco (1978) sets up three categories of celebrity. The 'hero' is someone who has actually done something spectacular to attract attention in the first place: astronauts, for instance, would fall into this category. The 'star' is the second category and they, according to Monaco, achieve prominence through the development of a public persona that is more important than their professional profile. Crudely, the movie actor is only a star if they become more interesting than their roles. Monaco suggests that many politicians aspire towards becoming a 'star' as a means of advancing their political careers. The third category is the 'quasar', and this roughly corresponds to what Turner et al. (2000) have referred to as the 'accidental celebrity'. This is the person who has become the focus of attention initially through no fault of their own, and through a process over which they can have very little control. Monica Lewinsky, London bombing survivor John Tulloch, kidnap victim Joanne Lees, or Australian disaster survivor Stuart Diver would be examples of this category.[6] The 'quasar', though, might be better understood as an effect of the contemporary operation of the news media rather than a category of celebrity. Any examination of how it worked as a cultural phenomenon would need to concentrate on the industrial conditions that assisted its production.[7]

Chris Rojek (2001: Chapter 1) has developed the most interesting set of categories, in my view, and the one which has been most widely adopted in recent years. Initially, his system does tend to repeat the kinds of distinctions we have already met; it outlines three broad types of celebrity, which are

categorised in terms of how celebrity is earned or attributed. According to Rojek's model, celebrity is 'ascribed' through blood relations (the British royal family, say), 'achieved' in open competition (sports stars), or 'attributed' by the media (television personalities). To some extent, the model implies a hierarchical progression so that 'attribution' follows as a consequence of achievement. As we have seen, however, the attribution of celebrity can occur without any significant achievement as its precondition and this is increasingly frequent within the media today.

Unlike the authors of most of the other taxonomies, however, Rojek acknowledges the limitations of this three-part model in its application to contemporary celebrity. In particular, he sees the need to address the heightened intensity and the apparent arbitrariness of the modern media's concentration on the celebrity and he has done this by coining the term 'celetoid'. The celetoid enjoys a hyper-visibility but also an especially short and unpredictable lifespan: the category includes film stars and television personalities as well as the kinds of figures we have been describing as 'accidental' celebrities or 'quasars'. (There is also a sub-category, the 'celeactor': this is the fictional character like Ali G or Dame Edna Everage who behaves in the public eye as if they were a 'real' celebrity.) Crucial factors are the sharpness of the trajectory their public careers typically describe (the celetoid may go from high visibility to virtual invisibility in a matter of weeks in some instances), and the way interest is manufactured around them as a means of promoting particular media products such as newspapers. What Rojek describes, then, is actually the logic and rhythm of the media production around such figures, rather than the attributes of particular people.

What is particularly distinctive about Rojek's approach is that he devotes a chapter to seriously addressing the other side of celebrity – the transgressive, notorious, or criminal figure (such as the Unabomber, for instance). Rojek accepts that celebrity in general is largely confirmatory of dominant values and that the notoriety he examines is definitively transgressive. Nonetheless, he defends the widening of his focus as a means of recognising the public impact of such figures: their capacity to generate fans, followers and copycat performances, for instance, as well as their effect on the 'public consciousness'. (He uses the equation, 'celebrity = public consciousness', as a means of explaining why he includes the 'notorious' as an aspect of celebrity within the study [2001: 8]). It's a fair point and it does seem worthwhile to consider how someone such as a convicted serial killer might generate fans – because they clearly do. However, the pro-social, pro-individualist and pro-capitalist discourses that construct the more conventional versions of celebrity are sufficiently consistent to suggest we might need another term to organise our discussion of the specificity of the cultural impact of

the notorious or criminal figure, even though many aspects of this impact reflect the workings of celebrity. Consequently, while there are some essays which have focused on this kind of celebrity (e.g., Schmid, 2006), it remains an undeveloped part of the field of celebrity studies.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF CELEBRITY

I began this chapter by looking at Boorstin's critique of celebrity as a means of acknowledging those accounts that regard celebrity as the epitome of all that is trivial, superficial, meretricious and deplorable about contemporary popular culture. There are certainly plenty of these, particularly in the opinion columns of newspapers and magazines – precisely the media, of course, where the discourses of celebrity circulate most vigorously. Some of these complaints have familiar origins in the elite critique of popular culture and probably have little new to say about celebrity in particular. Others, however, focus upon celebrity in detail so as to describe the function it performs for society and to explain why that is bad. Representative would be a view of our culture's interest in celebrity that regarded it as a form of mass delusion, what Schickel calls 'the illusion of intimacy' (1985: 4). This view implies contempt for the experience of the popular audience and offers no possibility of a positive or productive social function for the celebrity.

Such arguments are usually enclosed within long-running critical debates about cultural populism, tabloidisation and a diagnosis of the condition of the democratic public sphere – themes that will be discussed later on in this book. At this stage, however, I would like to review explanations of the more productive social and cultural functions that celebrity and its culture seems likely to perform for us today. The fact that celebrity has extended its purchase upon the public imagination across cultures and over time provides at least *prima facie* evidence that it might be performing some kind of social function for its consumers.

The first set of explanations of the productive social function of celebrity has already been referred to briefly earlier on. This is the argument that the celebrity generates para-social interactions that operate as a means of compensating for changes in the social construction of the communities within which many of us live. At one time the term 'para-social' may have described an impoverished surrogate for 'real' social relations, but that implication tends not to mark the most recent accounts.[8] The most obvious examples of para-social relationships dealt with in the contemporary literature are the popular reactions to the deaths of high profile celebrities – Elvis Presley (Marcus, 1991), John Lennon (Elliott, 1999), and most dramatically, Princess Diana (Re:Public, 1997). These are

instances where large numbers of people around the world respond to what they think of as 'real' emotional attachments with figures they know only through their representations in the media. It has taken some time even for those working in celebrity studies to realise that we need to take the testimony of such people at face value as the first step to better understanding this phenomenon. Indeed, some of the most resonant contributions to the literature have accepted and reflected upon their own investment in the para-social interaction with, for instance, Princess Diana and put cultural theory to work as a means of understanding it. (Richard Johnson's highly personal essay in 1999, for instance, is an example of this and is discussed in Chapter 5.) Also, as we shall see in Chapter 3, celebrities' take-up of social media has challenged some of the assumptions which had hitherto framed the description of the fan's relation to the celebrity as para-social: the capacity to communicate directly online doesn't easily fit that description (Marwick and boyd, 2011).

A second group of explanations gather around the celebrity's role as a location for the interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity. There are a number of dimensions to this. First, we have the discussion of celebrity as a source of gossip, which is itself understood as an important social process through which relationships, identity, and social and cultural norms are debated, evaluated, modified and shared (Hermes, 1995; Turner et al., 2000). Its expansion as a form of media content has inserted the celebrity into processes of social and personal identity formation that are clearly fundamental. This may have come at the cost of what we might think of as 'real' content – gossip about friends or people we know from direct personal encounters, for instance. However, there seems no intrinsic reason why the partial substitution of a category of content should have negative effects, or change the nature or productivity of the social and communicative processes into which it has been inserted. The second dimension sees the celebrity as a key location for the elaboration of the definition of the individual. Most accounts of the history of celebrity relate it to, among other things, the pairing of the growth of individualism with the rise of democracy.[9] As a result, it is suggested, celebrity operates 'at the very centre of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture' (Marshall, 1997: x). Marshall describes celebrity as one of the fundamental mechanisms for constructing and maintaining the discursive linkages between consumer capitalism, democracy and individualism. If Marshall is right, then celebrity has a crucial ideological function.

Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979) was groundbreaking in its proposition that stars worked like 'signs': as semiotic systems embedded with cultural

meanings to be actively read and interpreted by their audiences. Dyer argued that we read stars as texts and these texts are both ideologically saturated and discursively constructed. The meanings they generated were the product of a 'structured polysemy': this refers to the 'finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody as well as to the attempt to so structure them that some meanings are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced' (1979: 3). The celebrity is not only a semiotic regime, but also the visible tip of a highly contingent field of power relations. Dyer was particularly interested, though, in how society used stars as a means of thinking about the individual: 'they articulate the promise and the difficulty that the notion of the individual presents for all of us who live by it' (1986: 8). The contradictoriness of this process of 'articulation' has been widely acknowledged: while stars might represent 'individualised social types', they do so by actively reconciling competing principles – 'personal identity with social identity, and individualism with conformity' (Chaney, 1993: 145).

Marshall's work extends Dyer's analysis to apply it to celebrities across a range of media and he explains clearly how this process – the construction of the individual and the negotiation of social and cultural identities – works in practice:
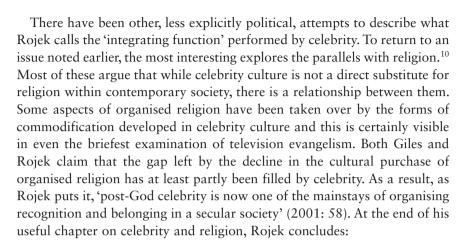
> The types of messages that the celebrity provides for the audience are modalised around forms of individual identification, social difference and distinction, and the universality of personality types. Celebrities represent subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their formation of social identities. Each celebrity represents a complex form of audience-subjectivity that, when placed within a system of celebrities, provides the ground in which distinctions, differences, and oppositions are played out. The celebrity, then, is an embodiment of a discursive battleground on the norms of individuality and personality within a culture. (1997: 65)

The reference to normativity, of course, implies a highly specific, sociologically classical, function for the celebrity. Marshall has put a slightly different spin on this, however, through his proposition that the celebrity-commodity provides a very powerful form of legitimation for capitalism's models of exchange and value by demonstrating that the individual has a commercial as well as a cultural value. A range of useful research dealing with reality TV, particularly the most recent work which has focused on the role of class in certain reality formats (Wood and Skeggs, 2011), has developed this dimension considerably, and is making a major contribution to our understandings of the contemporary political and cultural function of the media (Andrejevic, 2004; Hay and Ouellette, 2008; Skeggs and Wood, 2012).

There have been other, less explicitly political, attempts to describe what Rojek calls the 'integrating function' performed by celebrity. To return to an issue noted earlier, the most interesting explores the parallels with religion.[10] Most of these argue that while celebrity culture is not a direct substitute for religion within contemporary society, there is a relationship between them. Some aspects of organised religion have been taken over by the forms of commodification developed in celebrity culture and this is certainly visible in even the briefest examination of television evangelism. Both Giles and Rojek claim that the gap left by the decline in the cultural purchase of organised religion has at least partly been filled by celebrity. As a result, as Rojek puts it, 'post-God celebrity is now one of the mainstays of organising recognition and belonging in a secular society' (2001: 58). At the end of his useful chapter on celebrity and religion, Rojek concludes:

> To the extent that organised religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promotes new orders of meaning and solidarity. As such, notwithstanding the role that some celebrities have played in destabilising order, celebrity culture is a significant institution in the normative achievement of social integration. (2001: 99)

These accounts of the social function of celebrity reveal new angles of inspection onto the way our culture now generates meaning, significance, pleasure and desire, and in addition to this they offer us some new ways of explaining the distribution and operation of cultural power through the media and the publicity and promotion industries.

CELEBRITY AND THE PUBLICITY INDUSTRIES

Celebrity is an industry that creates highly visible products that most of us buy at one time or another and which play a significant part in our everyday lives. It is also an industry that spends a great deal of its time masking the fact that it exists at all. The point of publicity and promotion is to 'turn advertising into news' (Turner et al., 2000: 31) – to provide free editorial coverage of an event, person, or cause. Good publicists are invisible and good promotional strategies wind up on the front pages of newspapers, not in the gossip or entertainment columns. This can be achieved in many different ways but they must not puncture the illusion upon which the whole game depends: that 'the news' is the product of independent journalism.

We have reached the point where we are beginning to think more about how such a process does actually work. What are the industrial structures required, and upon what relationships – discursive, economic, political, and cultural – do they depend? To argue that celebrity has a social function, that

its products are open to semiotic analysis and that it participates directly in the negotiation of cultural identity, is not to deny that the celebrity is also a manufactured commodity, that its development is commercially strategic, and that its trade is one of the fundamental transactions within the cultural and media industries today. The following chapter, then, will focus on the industry that develops and markets the celebrity-as-commodity.

NOTES

1 Gitlin's *Media Unlimited* (2001), the source of our epigraph, is but one example of such a view, and Schickel's *Intimate Strangers* (1985) another, but there are many more.

2 Ian Connell (1992) argued that this less generous motivation was fundamental to celebrity media, and explained such phenomena as the malicious and clearly false stories about celebrities that circulate in the British tabloid press. Andrew Ross (1989), to extend it a little further, stated that the point of much popular culture was to signify its disrespect for the bourgeois values that sought to contain and control it; it is a point repeatedly made in John Hartley's work, and it is a key area of interest for Skeggs and Wood's (2012) interest in the working-class audiences for reality TV.

3 The first independent publicity firm was established in the USA in 1900 (Gamson, 1994: 22).

4 See the articles from Staiger and De Cordova in Gledhill (1991), as well as the accounts presented in Schickel (1985) and De Cordova's later book (1990).

5 While this is in some ways similar to the position taken by Boorstin back in 1961, Wernick's book owes more to the Marxian critiques of the Frankfurt School.

6 Monica Lewinsky needs no explanation, academic John Tulloch's photograph became an iconic referent for the London bombing of 2007, Joanne Lees was tied up and blindfolded by an unknown assailant in the middle of the Australian outback who is believed to have killed her boyfriend, Peter Falconio. A major media story in Australia and the UK in 2001, a number of the British tabloids raised the possibility that she herself was the killer and her story was a fabrication. Stuart Diver was the only survivor of a landslide in the snowfields in Australia in 1999; buried alive for several days in freezing conditions, his survival was seen as miraculous. He avoided publicity about his ordeal, but eventually hired a manager to gain control over the media's interest in his story.

7 There are lots of other taxonomies, of course. A further example would be David Giles's, which is similar in structure to Monaco's except for his division of the first category into two (2000: 115).

8 Joli Jenson (1992) reviews the earlier use of the term, tracing it back to the mid-1950s, and Chris Rojek (2001) provides a good example of the less judgemental contemporary use of the term.

9 Among the writers I deal with in this chapter who make this connection are Monaco (1978), Rojek (2001), Giles (2000), Marshall (1997), and Dyer (1979).

10 Rojek (2001 and 2012).