

Toward a New Definition of Celebrity

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NEAL GABLER

Neal Gabler, Senior Fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, is an author, cultural historian, and film critic. His first book, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Theatre Library Association Award. His second book, *Winchell: Gossip,*

Power and the Culture of Celebrity was named non-fiction book of the year by *Time* magazine. His most recent book is *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, and he is currently at work on a biography of Walt Disney.

Gabler has contributed to numerous publications including *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Esquire*, *New York Magazine*, *Vogue*, *American Heritage*, *The New York Republic*, *Us*, and *Playboy*. He has appeared on many television programs including *The Today Show*, *The CBS Morning News*, *The News Hour*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Charlie Rose*, and *Good Morning America*. Gabler also hosted *Sneak Previews* for PBS.

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Toward a New Definition of Celebrity

Most of us appreciate that celebrity and greatness are not the same.



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Nearly forty years ago in his pathbreaking book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, the cultural historian Daniel Boorstin issued his now-famous tautological proclamation on celebrity and effectively wrote what has been an epitaph for any serious consideration of the phenomenon. As Boorstin defined him, albeit with a distinct moralistic slant, a celebrity is a “person who is known for his well-knownness.” He is the “human pseudo-event” who has been manufactured for us but who has no substantiality — something hollow that is a manifestation of our own hollowness. There was a time, Boorstin wrote, when the famous were also the great, which meant that fame was a function of accomplishment. But he recognized that in his contemporary America of the 1960s this was no longer true since there were famous individuals who seemed to have accomplished very little, and he leapt from that recognition to the conclusion that greatness and celebrity were locked into a zero-sum game. The more celebrity you had, the less greatness you had, apparently on the assumption that the fame granted a celebrity devalues genuine fame that had been earned, in Boorstin’s words, via “the slow, the ‘natural’ way” rather than the “manufactured” or “artificial way.”

Most of us appreciate that celebrity and greatness are not the same commodity, but there is nevertheless a problem with Boorstin’s oft-quoted definition. Though there are obviously people who have gained recognition for having done virtually nothing of significance — a phenomenon I have called the “Zsa Zsa Factor” in honor of Zsa Zsa Gabor, who parlayed her marriage to actor George Sanders into a brief movie career and the movie career into a much more enduring celebrity — Boorstin’s definition is simply not true for the vast majority of celebrities. Unless you use the term to define itself — that is, a celebrity is by definition someone who is famous for not having accomplished anything of

Celebrity is an art form wrought in the medium of life.



Celebrity seems to refract many of the basic concerns of the culture.

value — most of the people we call celebrities have accomplished something, and many of them have accomplished a great deal. Michael Jordan, Shaquille O’Neal, Wayne Gretzky, Mark McGwire and other star athletes are by any measure celebrities, yet they are also by any measure achievers as well. Likewise, Julia Roberts, Tom Hanks, Barbra Streisand and Marlon Brando. They are undeniably celebrities, but they are also, at the very least, remarkable entertainers. To deny their achievements is as meaningless as denying their celebrity. And one can make a converse argument for any number of writers, musicians, visual artists, politicians, even the occasional captain of industry. To deny their celebrity is as meaningless as denying their achievements.

Writing at a time when celebrity was relatively fresh and highly suspect, Boorstin was exercising a traditionalist’s bias in regarding it as a kind of cultural deformity along with so many other products of mass media. But in the years since, with the explosion of celebrity and its increasing centrality in American life, another possibility has arisen — one that would no doubt offend Boorstin and other traditionalists but one that may better enable us to understand how celebrity functions than Boorstin’s dismissive definition did. It is entirely possible that celebrity, far from being a symptom of cultural degradation, is actually an art form wrought in the medium of life. More, on the evidence, it is even possible that celebrity is now our dominant art form, not only in the attention it demands or in the way it subjugates other media but in the way it seems to refract so many of the basic concerns of the culture, precisely as art does.

Boorstin was right on one thing: Celebrity is a function of “well-knownness.” Needless to say, a celebrity must be known or he is no celebrity, which is why publicity is a prerequisite. Boorstin was wrong, however, in seeing celebrity as *only* a function of well-knownness. While there is no such thing as a celebrity who isn’t famous, there are famous individuals whom most of us would not consider celebrities. Queen Elizabeth is certainly famous, but one doubts whether most Americans would call her a

celebrity the way Princess Di was. George Bush, Sr. is famous, but he is not a celebrity. His successor Bill Clinton is. Vice President Dick Cheney is famous, but he is no celebrity. There are no paparazzi elbowing one another aside to snap Cheney's picture, no swooning Cheney fans crying out, "Dick, Dick," most of all no Cheney stories filling the tabloids.*

So what turns a famous person into a celebrity? The grand answer, on empirical evidence, seems to be narrative. The main reason we want to read about certain individuals in the supermarket tabloids or in *People* or *Vanity Fair*, or we want to watch television reports about them on "Entertainment Tonight" or "Access Hollywood" is that we are interested in their stories: In Matthew Perry's drug addiction, in Tom Cruise's and Nicole Kidman's divorce, in the serial romances of Russell Crowe, in Jesse Jackson's love child, in the Hillary/Bill relationship. Queen Elizabeth and Dick Cheney may have fame, but they don't have stories. (Of course, in England Elizabeth may have become a celebrity by virtue of having become a player in Di's story.) Frankly, if they did, they would be celebrities, too.

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 So what turns a famous person into a celebrity? Narrative.

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 My own incipient definition of celebrity in my book *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality* was that a celebrity was "human entertainment," by which I obviously meant not a conventional entertainer but a person who, by the very process of *living*, provided entertainment for us — a definition that embraced most conventional entertainers, such as movie and television stars, whose lives fill the gossip columns and magazines, but also businessmen like Donald Trump,

*The issue is complicated by something I shall address in a later paper on "celebrity treatment." The media have devised a semiotics of celebrity in both word and image that they apply to virtually anyone they cover whether he is a celebrity or not. Therefore, non-celebrities receive the "celebrity treatment," a kind of breathless glamorization which may lead us to confuse them with real celebrities.

What stars are to traditional movies, celebrities are to the “life movie!”



Occasionally even the suggestion of a narrative is enough to create celebrity.

politicians like Bill and Hillary Clinton, fashion designers like Ralph Lauren, alleged criminals like O.J. Simpson, even certain products that have especially fascinating origins or astonishing sales the recounting of which could provide entertainment for us. In retrospect, however, that definition was inadequate because, for one thing, it didn't identify the source of the entertainment: Plotlines. What all these people and things have in common is that they are living out narratives that capture our interest and the interest of the media — narratives that have entertainment value. Or put another way, what stars are to traditional movies, celebrities are to what I call the “life movie” — a movie written in the medium of life.

Boorstin himself realized that fame had a narrative component, but he explicitly separated the narrative from the celebrity. Using aviator Charles Lindbergh as an example, Boorstin saw Lindbergh's greatness and subsequent fame flowing from his accomplishment of having flown solo across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Lindbergh transmogrified into a celebrity only when his publicity and popularity reached a critical mass where they *became* the story, usurping the accomplishment itself and making Lindbergh well known for being well known.

Or so Boorstin has it. Putting aside the issue of whether gaining popularity by whatever means isn't itself a kind of accomplishment in America, what Boorstin failed to recognize is that popularity is the by-product of celebrity, not its source. For Lindbergh, the source was the narrative of that flight — a narrative that was later elaborated by his marriage to socialite Anne Morrow and by the tragic kidnapping and murder of their baby in 1932. He wasn't well known for being well known. He was well known — a celebrity — because he had a great story, and he remained a celebrity because he, or history, kept adding new chapters to it.

Of course you don't need a great story to be a celebrity any more than a movie needs a great script to be a film. Occasionally even the suggestion of a narrative is enough to create celebrity if the suggestion hints at such durable narrative crowd-pleasers as sex or violence. Take the typical

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fashion model. In the case of Gisele Bündchen, the Brazilian bombshell prominently featured in Victoria's Secret ads, her beauty plants a narrative seed. Her looks are intriguing enough that we want to know what her story is. For those who care, it turns out that she is being touted as the new look in fashion models, voluptuous rather than waiflike — a look that makes her in demand on the runways and in the haute couture magazines. More important, as with most widely photographed models, her beauty catapults her into the world of celebrity where she is essentially a walk-on in other people's narratives. But once she arrives in that world, the story needs more heft if she is to achieve her own real celebrity, and in Gisele's case, it gets that heft. She begins being seen with the actor Leonardo DiCaprio. They deny a romance. A few months later there are rumors of an engagement ring, which again they deny. (The plot thickens.) Then finally and suddenly they announce their nuptials. Bingo! Gisele has now entered as co-star another celebrity narrative, DiCaprio's, where if she plays her cards right, she can maintain her celebrity for quite a while — certainly much longer than if she had remained just another pretty face without a story to go with it.

Though the Giseles of the world are proliferating, there are sound reasons why conventional entertainers like Leonardo DiCaprio remain the likeliest candidates for celebrity, first and foremost of which is that stars by virtue of being stars come equipped with the first two prerequisites for celebrity: Publicity and what might be called a "foundation narrative." They all have the story of their success, always a good tale and the subplot of everything else they are likely to do in their lives. So long as one keeps building one's career, keeps leaping from one success to the next, one really doesn't need much more of a narrative to sustain one's celebrity. Think of Tom Hanks whose life has few soap operatic elements but whose success has continued unimpeded and whose celebrity flourishes as a result.

Conventional stars also have the advantage over other potential celebrities of being able to draw on the roles they play which their fans often

conflate with the stars' real lives, allowing the actors, in effect, to borrow the narratives from their movies or television shows. A great lover on screen is frequently assumed to be a great lover in real life, a tough guy on screen a tough guy in life, a great soul on screen a great soul in life. The only action John Wayne saw in World War II was on the screen in war films, yet his heroism in those movies became welded to his personal narrative to the point where he was given awards and honors for his bravery. People believed, evidently wanted to believe, that it was his story and not just his performance.



Stars generate a narrative because they are much more likely to be at the center of the action.



Finally, stars of conventional media benefit from the fact that they are more likely to generate a narrative because they are much more likely to be at the center of the action — to be sued or stalked or attacked or romanced. Thus when would-be extortionists plotted to kidnap him, Australian actor Russell Crowe was able to add this thriller sequence to his foundation narrative and to the narrative of his ill-fated romance with actress Meg Ryan. Or when an obsessive fan managed to invade her Malibu home, Pamela Anderson was able to add the brief scene to her tempestuous relationship to rock star Tommy Lee. Even relatively minor episodes become larger when they star a star: Actress Halle Berry's auto mishaps, Tom Cruise's purportedly saving a life, Sandra Bullock's surviving a bumpy plane landing.

In the taxonomy of celebrity stories, one might call these sorts of narratives star-driven, and it is axiomatic that the bigger the star, the less compelling the narrative has to be, which is why a Bruce Willis or a Bill Clinton need only attend a function or eat in a restaurant to get press coverage. But just as there are movies that rely on the ingenuity of plot rather than on star power, so there are celebrity narratives that are plot-driven. John Wayne Bobbitt, Joey Buttafuoco, Kato Kaelin and Tonya Harding have all been thrust into minor celebrity because they have starred in entertaining vehicles that commanded press attention, though, given the fact that these narratives are all one-shots without the foundation narrative or much likelihood for elaboration, they

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provide a more evanescent form of celebrity. As the central narrative fades, there is little more these players can do to sustain it, however much, like Buttafuoco, or Kaelin they may try, because there isn't the publicity for their work that conventional stars enjoy when they are out flogging a movie or TV show. In time, the stars of plot-driven celebrity run out of plot and necessarily run out of celebrity, becoming the life movie equivalents of faded film stars who no longer have their pictures to keep them in the public consciousness.

Boorstin, looking at the dearth of achievement in celebrity, saw all celebrity as perishable. Once the publicity is withdrawn, so is the celebrity since there is nothing, presumably, left behind. But celebrities don't perish because the publicity is withdrawn. The publicity is withdrawn because they cease to provide a narrative that is worth writing about or broadcasting, or, from the audience's point of view, worth watching or reading about. This is especially true of conventional stars when their foundation narrative falters and there is no success to fuel another story. So long as you can provide a story, there need not be closure until you die, though there are individuals like Marilyn Monroe, James Dean and John F. Kennedy whose narratives continue through revelations and reinterpretations long after the stars themselves have departed.

Whether they still qualify as celebrities in death is open to debate, but one could make a powerful case that celebrity also requires a corporeal protagonist who can continue to provide a dynamic plot and who has not just left behind a narrative to be amended and reworked by others like some ancient text. Dead celebrities are just that: Their stories are entombed. Since celebrity is a kind of performance art, if audiences don't feel there is a live personality starring in the narrative, if they don't feel that the narrative can take new and surprising turns, if they don't feel that they could actually meet the protagonist, there is some essential frisson missing. Celebrity seems to depend to some degree on the idea of tangibility.

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Of course movies and television shows have tangible stars, too and, as noted, people do confuse the person with the part. But one of the things that generates the excitement of celebrity, one of the things that distinguishes celebrity narratives from the fictional or even fact-based narratives of conventional media, is the congruence between the person and the narrative he is living. Thirty years ago, when fans would see Elizabeth Taylor they knew that she — *that person* — had had great romances, had pried singer Eddie Fisher from wife Debbie Reynolds, had left husband Fisher for actor Richard Burton, had had a stormy on-again, off-again marriage with Burton. They knew, in effect, that it wasn't make-believe — that *this* woman had actually done *those* things and that those things were invested in her person. She was a human version of Walter Benjamin's original object as opposed to its reproduction, which is what she played in the movies, and it is entirely possible that the public urge for the original is one of the primary sources for the rise of celebrity. We want the real thing.

Talmudists of celebrity may debate whether fictional characters — a Harry Potter, a Pokeman, a Scarlett O'Hara, a Santa Claus — can ever be considered celebrities since they lack both tangibility (they don't really exist) and they lack personal narratives. It may have been with this in mind that Walt Disney back in the mid-1930s felt compelled to concoct a back story for his own putative celebrity, Mickey Mouse. Children, not realizing that Mickey wasn't tangible, would write Disney wanting to know if Mickey and Minnie were married — that is, they wanted to know his life narrative. To fulfill that narrative expectation, Walt once told a magazine interviewer that Mickey and Minnie played boyfriend and girlfriend on screen but that in "real life" they were married. Thus did Mickey make his bid for celebrity — one that was fated to fail should children discover that Mickey wasn't real and that they could never meet the original, only the facsimile at Disneyland or Disney World in the same way they might meet Santa Claus at Macy's. It is only those true innocents who think that Disneyland's Mickey *is* Mickey or

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Macy's Santa *is* Santa for whom Mickey and Santa can be celebrities, which is why so many parents, myself included, lied to our children. We didn't want to deny them the thrill of celebrity.

By this analysis, it is clear that celebrity is not, as Boorstin theorized, a thing that one acquires the way one might acquire fame, simply by being grazed by the media spotlight. Like any work of art, celebrity is the product of a process. One needs a performer. One needs a personal real-life, or purportedly real-life, narrative, even if it is only the foundation narrative. One needs publicity for that narrative. And last, but by no means least, one needs fans — an audience to appreciate the narrative and admire its star; for in the end, celebrity without someone to consume it is like a movie without someone to watch it. Or to paraphrase Berkeley, if a celebrity story is generated and there is no one to hear or see it, it doesn't make a sound. Di without the adoring throngs, Jordan without the hero-worshippers, Buttafuoco without the glad-handing well-wishers, any movie star without the screaming mobs wouldn't be celebrities. By the same token, Timothy McVeigh had publicity, a narrative and, before his execution, tangibility, but without fans to anoint him, he was just another well-known criminal — a protagonist in a story but not its star. He wasn't a celebrity.

Attempting to find a working definition of celebrity would be a sterile academic exercise if the result didn't help explain the phenomenon and bring us closer to some understanding of why it seems so utterly bewitching. The new definition proffered here is intended to provide a few provisional conclusions. For one thing, it may go some way toward explaining why celebrity has become a kind of cultural kudzu. Seen as a narrative form, celebrity is a great new entertainment in a society ever hungry for entertainment. It is pliant, novel, authentic rather than imagined, by definition plausible and suspenseful since it is constantly unwinding. In effect, celebrity is the ultimate in so-called reality programming. More, it is adaptable to other media the way, say, a novel might be adapted for the screen, creating unparalleled opportunities for

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synergy. Celebrity provides magazines, television, newspapers, books and increasingly the Internet with stories and stars; these media in turn provide celebrity, having no screen of its own, with a veritable multiplex to reach the public.

In fact, celebrity narratives are now so exciting and inventive that fictional narrative has a hard time competing with them. When director Taylor Hackford complained that his film *Proof of Life*, featuring Russell Crowe and Meg Ryan, fared so poorly at the box office because the movie was superseded by the story of the romance between its stars, he was implicitly acknowledging celebrity as an art form. While it has often been true that tabloid stories about stars have created an appetite to see those stars on screen, what Hackford was essentially saying is that, given the choice, the audience seemed to prefer the real-life story to the fictionalized one, and if they wanted their dose of Crowe and Ryan, they were going to get it in the tabloids and on the tabloid TV shows rather than on the movie screen.

Critics of celebrity have rightfully complained that celebrity seems to have no moral component — that even an O.J. Simpson can become a celebrity with fans eager to see him, touch him, get his autograph. Thinking of celebrity as an art form may go some way toward explaining that, too. The problem with celebrity is not that it is vaguely immoral, as Boorstin seemed to suggest, or fundamentally amoral but that, like any art form, it is fundamentally aesthetic. Aesthetically speaking, celebrity narratives can be either good or bad. They can appeal to us as stories or not. They can either be entertaining or not, complex or not, resonant or not. Taking the example of Simpson, however one felt about him personally, most people seemed to think that his story was, by aesthetic standards, a fascinating one — rich in plot and strumming thematic chords of race, sex, power. The fact that he already had fans from his days as a football player and actor meant that the new chapter could intensify his celebrity.

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Still, plots are seldom neutral. Stories can and almost always do encapsulate values. In conventional fictional narrative art, say novels or movies, we are occasionally confronted with the situation of liking the plot but disapproving of its values or, more often, of disapproving of a protagonist but liking the author's values. Unfortunately, when it comes to celebrity narratives one cannot so easily make the distinction between the plot and its values or between the protagonist's values and the author's because the protagonist is the author and the plot is what we choose to make of it. For some people, the O.J. Simpson story is a tale of injustice — the system's toward O.J. For others, the tale lays out another sort of injustice — O.J.'s over the system. Except in situations like McVeigh's where the public seems unified in its horror and contempt, the same plot is susceptible to different interpretations, different conclusions and different values, which is also why Simpson can actually retain fans. What celebrity lacks, then, is an authorial voice to impose moral value on the narrative — a deficiency that is easy to mistake for having no moral values whatsoever. It gets even easier to make that mistake when fans, whose only paradigm for celebrity is the movies, turn the stars of the celebrity narratives, like Simpson or Buttafuoco, into objects of devotion on the principle that, barring total depravity, a star of any medium, even life, is still a star.

The most important aspect of celebrity that a new definition might bring into sharper focus, however, is function. As Boorstin disapprovingly saw celebrity, it was a way for a narcissistic society to whittle the great down to its own size — to reduce sequoias to splinters. This, almost any contemporary observer would now concede, was too reductive an analysis. Whether or not one thinks of celebrity as an art form, it certainly performs many of the functions of art. Celebrity narratives can reinforce fears and dreams, instruct and guide us, transport us from daily routine, reassure us that we are not alone in what we think and feel, impose order on experience. This is what the critic Richard Schickel was onto over fifteen years ago in his brilliant study of celebrity,

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Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity in America, when he called celebrity “the principle source of motive power in putting across ideas of every kind — social, political, aesthetic, moral.”

If celebrity is the new art form, it may have been the inadequacy of traditional narrative forms in fulfilling their obligations that has helped make it so. Celebrity not only has narrative advantages over traditional art, it seems to be the most effective, the most efficient, the most accessible, the most rapid, the nimblest means to reify the country's inchoate fears and longings and to do so entertainingly to boot. Celebrity is protean. It can touch upon practically anything in American life: Race (O.J. Simpson), changing sexual roles (Bobbitt), middle-age crisis (Bill Clinton), betrayal (Woody Allen and Mia Farrow), sexual harassment (Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill), you name it. One is almost assured that if an issue is roiling somewhere in the American consciousness there will eventually be a celebrity narrative to dramatize it.

The basic star-driven narrative may have narrower range than these plot-driven ones, but whatever it lacks in variety it compensates for in resonance. Whether it is the standard success story or the standard addiction story or the standard divorce story, star-driven narratives ultimately resolve themselves into an overarching archetype, which, as I wrote in *Life the Movie*, is the very same archetype that the anthropologist Joseph Campbell described in his landmark study of cross-cultural myths, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. As Campbell laid out the “monomyth” that appears in virtually every culture, a hero arrives in our community from ordinary origins, he embarks on a quest into a supernatural world during which he undergoes a series of trials and temptations, and, having survived them, he returns to earth to pass on what he has learned in the process. And what he has learned is this: That the hero and the god, the seeker and the found, the ordinary world and the supernatural world are really one. Or in New Age terms, it is all inside us.

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When you tunnel past all the various celebrity maladies that are dutifully chronicled in the tabloids, this is what you get: A celebrity arrives on the scene from circumstances not very different from ours. He enters the wondrous world of show business where he encounters his own trials and temptations from drugs to sex to career setbacks, and, having survived them, he returns to us via the media to pass on what he has learned, which is, basically, that he is no different from us, that his priorities are the same as ours, that for all the fame and power and glory and sex he has, the only thing that truly matters is knowing who you are. Depending on where he happens to be in his life movie, every celebrity story now lands somewhere in this archetype and works its way toward that final realization or — in the case of most celebrities who suffer relapses and embark on numerous affairs — series of realizations since celebrities, unlike Campbell's heroes, apparently have to be reminded again and again and again of what it is they are supposed to have learned.

It is, of course, a reassuring message for those of us who will never experience celebrity, whose lives don't have great narratives and won't attract publicity or fans. But it also creates a dialectic between the narrative and tangible components of celebrity, on the one side, and its publicity and fan components on the other — a dialectic that Campbell never had to address. The narrative tells us that celebrity is a learning process toward self-actualization and realization, and the celebrity's tangibility tells us that he is, again like Benjamin's original, a real person with real needs — like everyone else. The publicity and fan components tell us that celebrity is about gaining attention and acknowledgment — about *not* being like everyone else. The celebrity narrative is a cautionary lesson about the pitfalls of fame, rendered meaningful by the celebrity's tangibility. Publicity and fandom are about the thrill of being known and the blessings that flow from it. The celebrity narrative and the celebrity's tangibility are about identification — theirs' with us, and ours' with them. Publicity and fandom are about vicariousness — about



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our feeling that they are not like us, that they are in fact better than we are, certainly more powerful. In short, celebrity, dialectically constructed, taps some of the deepest contradictions about who we are and who we would like to be. It simultaneously comforts us and disturbs us, celebrating the virtue of ordinariness while holding out something to which we can aspire. It plays it both ways.

Therein may be where the psychic power of celebrity lies. Like the American Dream itself, which it often resembles, it holds out its availability, but even as it does so, we see it is a kind of secular blessedness so special that only the chosen get it. In his learned and now-classic analysis of fame, *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy looks constantly to the relationship between religion and fame, between the promised afterlife and the temporal immortality of publicity. Seen in that context, the celebrity narrative as actualized by the process of “celebritization” is the story of the people who have been sprung from the pack in a kind of new Calvinism. We suspect that however much they may protest against the idea of their exceptionality, those who live celebrity are the sanctified, the best, the most deserving. And having conspired in the creation of this new art form as fans, we get the dispensation to watch them, to share them, to consume them, to enjoy them, to bask in their magnificence and to imagine that we might have a narrative of our own some day, allowing us to join them.