

STATE OF THE ART

How the Digital Revolution & Television have conspired to Shrink the Movies:

by Nick Zegarac

Technologically and artistically speaking, the movies have gotten smaller. In presentation alone, yesteryear's glamorous and ornamental movie palace is today's big box and noisy stadium-styled multiplex. The once enveloping concave surface of Cinemascope, VistaVision, Todd A-O and 70mm projection has today largely been replaced with the flat 1:85:1 television friendly aspect ratio easily transferable to the small screen. Contemporary directors are encouraged to shoot their movies with future television broadcasts in mind.

Excluding the errant overstuffed Oscar contender, the average film's running time rarely tops the two hour mark. More often it leans toward the much shorter ninety minutes. Coupled with the inflated prices for general admission and condiments, and the absence of newsreels, cartoons and our national anthem from the program, the excitement of going to the movies has, on the whole, been compromised.

Is it any wonder that the contemporary filmgoer is inundated with commercial endorsements for Ford, Coca-Cola and Cingular wireless service before their feature presentation? Today's moving going experience has been systematically reduced to glorified television-viewing status.

In both content and genre, the movies have shriveled from their once galvanic narratives of Olympian heroism. Instead the artistic milieu is populated by quick cut juxtapositions befitting the six o'clock news with all the lack of subtlety in having been produced by Geraldo Rivera.



Bio pics have regressed from character driven and introspective critiques of Zola or Gandhi (right) to tabloid-esque investigations of serial killers (*Monster* 2004, right) or smut-raking corporate titans (*The People Vs. Larry Flynt* 1996). Today's musicals have supplanted the blind optimism and sparkle of sheer joy found in, say *Singin' In The Rain* (1952), and instead create an artistic discomfort in their shift from buoyant fantasy to gritty reality (*Chicago*, 2003).



In absence of any genuine shock value, contemporary horror (*Saw* 2004, *House of Wax* 2005) merely repulses for its obligatory thirty-second moment of gruesomeness. Romantic comedies have perhaps suffered most under political correctness; merely eschewing the all out battle of the sexes, still most astutely handled in films like *Woman of the Year* (1942, below) or *Adam's Rib* (1949). At best then, today's romantic comedies reaffirm the cliché of idyllic heterosexual romance (*The Wedding Date* 2005) or serve to make light of ethnic stereotypes (*My Big Fat Greek Wedding* 2002, below).

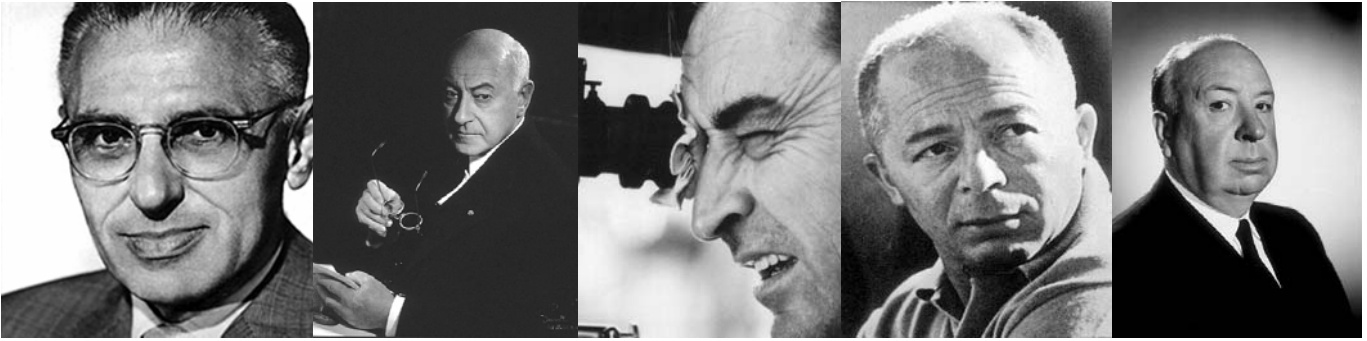


Stylistically, all film genres today have become victims of the MTV and video game generation, characterized by guerilla-styled editing that has supplanted and taken over from genuine film aesthetics. As an audience we are no longer treated to either complete performances or fully developed scenes, but instead are besieged by momentary glimpses of sound bytes awash in a barrage of quick cuts, heavy panning and highly unstable hand-held camera movements.

No time is allotted for the pleasurable audience consumption of the image; the camera no longer making love to memorable scenes and faces, but rather raping both of artistic integrity in an attempt to condense the narrative timeline to a litany of unprovoked close-ups and medium shots, endlessly forced upon the human psyche. This is precisely why older films seem slower when viewed from a contemporary vantage.



Yet, in that slower pace there is the opportunity for stars to prove their metal, to make love to the camera in close up and wow the audience with their gifts as highly trained thespians. In keeping with the shortcomings of many contemporary celebrities, who do not act per say, but allow the camera to do it all in their stead, the editor has been given an unusual amount of autonomy to hack into the narrative structure



(Above: Masters in Fine Art: directors George Cukor, Cecil B. DeMille, David Lean, Billy Wilder, Alfred Hitchcock.

Under the studio system, each facet of the motion picture assembly line apparatus cultivated the best and the brightest in their respective field. Directors were no exception to that rule - hired as directors and remained directors until their retirement – self imposed or otherwise. Today’s celebrities are more and more becoming their own directors – the moniker of ‘jack of all trades, master of none’ more applicable than ever before.)



of a film as though it were coleslaw instead of filmic art.

Even more disheartening and damaging to contemporary American cinema has been the concerted effort, nee zest, from film producers and directors today to mimic their old arch nemesis – television. What is occurring on screen is not tributary to the bravado and genius of great American directors like George Cukor, John Ford, Frank Capra, William Wyler et al, but rather, a debasement of the very fundamentals in film making. Movie narratives in general have become more episodic, designed to fit neatly into the dissected commercial realm of television.



And then, of course, there is filmdom’s latest fascination with the ‘little black box’ in everyone’s living room – the updated for film – television show. Once considered the tiny gremlin that cannibalized movies by luring prospective ticket buyers away from the box office, television has today become the movie’s newest best friend. As a result, movies are now feasting on T.V. for their own sustenance; **Starsky and Hutch** (2004), **Miami Vice** (2006) et al.



Plots that were barely sustainable within a half hour or hour of commercial interrupted broadcasting are being awkwardly expanded to accommodate a two hour film time slot. Some small-to-big screen incarnations, like **The Brady Bunch Movie** (1995) or **Addam’s Family Values** (1993), combine several narratives borrowed from the television series to fill in for these discrepancies in time. These small-to-big screen mutations narrowly and primarily rely on nostalgia to sustain interest for the audience.

One marvels, for example, at Shelly Long’s startling emulation of Florence Henderson’s Mrs. Brady, or

Raoul Julia's more subtle evocation of John Astin's Gomez. So too is there a hushed reverence afforded to the set and costume designers for their abilities to resurrect the bygone tacky 70s chic of the Brady home or reinvent the lurid gothic appeal of the Addam's family abode. Yet these imitations are gratuitous and reeking of parody.

There is, to be assured, a deliberate purpose to all this copy-cat madness. Nearly two thirds of today's film revenue is derived from a combination of cable/satellite and network broadcasting deals, and, through distribution and sale of films as byproduct to the home video market. Hence, films have transcended the realm of pop art to become chronic regurgitations and fill-ins; disposable entertainment for the twenty-four hour network junkie. The net result is that movies are no longer considered as stand alone bread and butter for the studios, by the studios.

What is perhaps even more discrediting to the art of bygone cinema is today's contemporary resurgence of old iconography reconstituted as easily marketable commercial campaigns; for example – through digital manipulations stars like Fred Astaire and Humphrey Bogart are seen endorsing everything from Coca-Cola to vacuum cleaners.

Sarah Jessica Parker exploits Rodgers and Hammerstein's **Flower Drum Song** (1961) when she 'enjoys being a girl' for The Gap (right). Such postmodern misrepresentations are hardly flattering to the original source material, but particularly insulting in the case of deceased stars where the level of their own personal compliance remains highly questionable.

Would Bogie appreciate seeing a tie-dyed version of himself sipping Coke in a trendy café populated by super models and Elton John? Would Astaire, who once danced with a coat rack in **Royal Wedding** (1951), recognize the not-so-subtle jab at his artistic integrity with his juxtaposition next to an Orek Excel?



The answers to these questions can never be known. What is clear about the marketing strategies of these and other similar advertising campaigns is that, in the final analysis the importance of filmic culture has been diminished into an even more manipulative form of disposable pop art. As the audience, we are left with the indelible, often unpleasant aftertaste of exploitation, begging the question of where is that "stuff that dreams (were once) made of"?

PART TWO

"It's The Pictures That Got Small!"

After a brief interlude in literally expanding the proportions of film-making, through the use of widescreen technologies that began with the dawning of Cinerama and Cinemascope in the early 1950s and ended approximately in 1969 - where the whole of finite earthly delights and infinite realms of outer space teemed from the grandeur of 'bigger is better' – Hollywood began a slow reverse shot into the realm of safe film making. This is not to suggest that the 1920s, 30s or even 40s were decades in absence of progress and innovation.



On the contrary, technologically and artistically they were cutting edge in developing the state of the art of motion picture entertainment and, they paved the way for the big and bold look of the 1950s. For a while, at least, it seemed as though the influence of the "bigger is better" mentality would become the new standard. Instead, and almost universally, contemporary American cinema has abandoned its anamorphic globe-trotting for the clinical solace of digital domains.

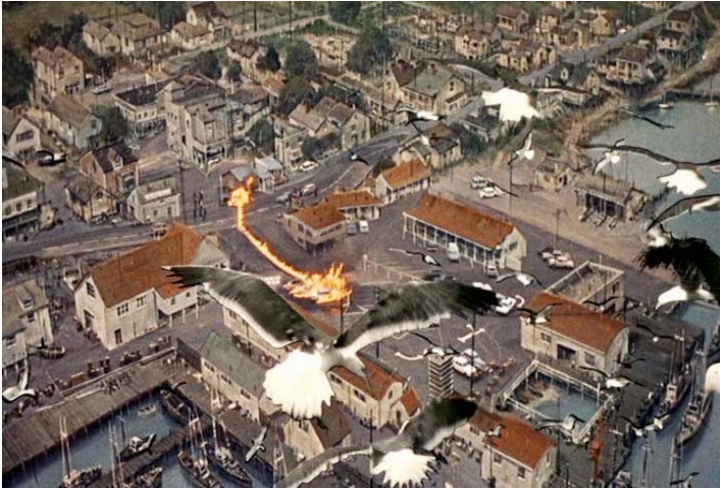
After all, why should today's film maker seek to immortalize the timeless beauty of Rome on location, when a fully realized three-dimensional facsimile can be generated from a computer artist's hi-resolution monitor?

Lest we remember that the Rome in *Roman Holiday* (1953) or *Three Coins in The Fountain* (1954) or even *Ben-Hur* (1959) is not perfect. It breathes imperfection from its craggy pavement and masonry, its chipped and fragmented wrinkles that extol the mastery of the ages. But the Rome that William Wyler glamorized and Fellini

scrutinized is, with all its obvious visual flaws, nevertheless eternally haunted, thrilling and alive; visceral qualities that the Rome in *Gladiator* (2000) decidedly lacks. In the latter example the human eye is instantly drawn to the obvious absurdity of cleanliness in digital effects; the smoothness of an orb too round to have been chiseled by human hands, or the supreme perpendicular inclines of a temple that is more schematic than ancient skyscraper.



(Above: two views of ancient Rome: top – William Wyler’s Circus Maximus from Ben-Hur 1959 – a combination of full scale set and matte process painting. Bottom: Circus Maximus as recreated for Ridley Scott’s Gladiator 2000 – only the guards in the immediate foreground and players in dead center are real.)



(Above: special effects – old school. *The Birds* (1963) utilized a sodium matte process to combine live action with matte paintings and blue screen plate photography. Left: *Brigadoon* (1954) was shot virtually on one soundstage with a 360 degree cyclorama made of large canvas paintings and paper mache. Two worlds of imagined artifice made palpable without digital technologies.)

To be certain, in absence of computer wizardry, the old Hollywood masters were well schooled in the art of visual deception through trick photography and matte paintings. Yet, even in the knowledge that some background effects from some of Hollywood's most beloved classics are little more than cardboard craftsmanship working overtime, more paper mache (*Brigadoon*, 1954) or a series of brush strokes added by matte artist Albert Witlock (*The Birds*, 1963), not only but especially in these, there is a retention of genuine weight presence and believability that allow for the fantastic to seem quite plausible. This art consumes the spectator, moving our collective consciousness from the darkness of the theater into labyrinths of visual excitement. The real becomes hyper-sensitive. The illusion burst forth from its two dimensional mirage to become its own spectacular reality. It convinces the mind of its' own alternate state. The result; its' artistry entertains.

Today's cinematic experience, by direct contrast, has lost much of that visceral charm. Perhaps from the moment Steven Spielberg imposed his digital dinosaurs on the unsuspecting moviegoer in *Jurassic Park* (1993) he forever altered the tenuous and delicate sustainability of illusion to its own detriment. As a director Spielberg should have looked no further than to generate fantasies from mechanical sharks (*Jaws* 1975, right) and rubber-masked alien puppetry (*E.T.* 1982, left). Instead, what has been lost in the translation from genuine





fake to graphic invisible is the humanity behind the art of cinema fantasy. The differences between the traditional canvas and the computer template have in fact grounded the cinematic world to a narrow, deliberate and more easily manipulated realm of possibilities.

For example; there is a moment in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, below left) where the valiant charge of Arab revolt on camel raises so much sand and dust that the audience's view of the principle actors is threatened with total eclipse. And yet, it is in the immediacy of that charge, in the audiences perceivable danger – that at any moment one or more

of the riders might fall from their mount and be trampled underfoot and hoof, in anticipation of the inevitable that never happens, that the screen thunders with a heightened sense of excitable realism.



Consider a similar scene; the attack on Mordor from *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* (2003, above right). Here the hoards and hellions have been digitally created. They are kept in deep focus, yet avoid scrutiny from an audience through manic editing that never allows our eyes to entirely settle on one particular graphic or action. This visual assault on the moviegoer's senses is made complete with the roar of six track stereo rushing in from all sides of the theater. Yet, the spectacle does not stimulate as much as it stifles the audience into a sort of visual submission. The ultimate impact is not enveloping, but engulfing. What the scene lacks in genuine exhilaration is overcompensated for through an utter exhaustion of our sensory nerves.

To be certain, the technical wizards behind these new worlds without end have learned their craft well - perhaps too well. What they lack is the good sense to exercise restraint in their ability to dazzle. The on-camera result is akin to executing a trick without sustaining any belief in its magic. The audience is completely robbed of its suspension in disbelief. Though more cleverly camouflaged than the old wire harnesses and matte effects of days of old, these new hi-res worlds are nevertheless more obvious and obtrusive. It is impossible not to pay attention to the men "behind the curtain" reveling with their computer toys at ILM, because their very absence is as deliberate metaphor derived from their handy work seen on the screen.

The illusion becomes mere effect, drawing attention, instead of becoming integrated into the arch of the narrative. As an audience we are no longer teased from the peripheral edges of the screen but are force fed obviousness front and center. Once the human eye and mind make the connection and acknowledge



that nothing before them is real, the illusion is no longer grand, but merely clever. What remains then for the audience is mere acknowledgement for the hours of painstaking effort put forth in order to create these effects.

While American cinema of the 50s and 60s sought its stories in spectacle, today's strain of film making has substituted heavy-handed layering of spectacle for substance, thereby burying its hubris beneath a malaise of artifice. This is primarily why classic Hollywood films retain their aura of mystery that re-invites us into multiple viewings. For example; multiple viewings of **Casablanca** (1942) or **The Wizard of Oz** (1939) are never enough. The retention of hubris – the human element and connection to the characters, despite the filmic spectacle in each of the aforementioned has made these films perennial classics. But there can be no lasting future for the great American movie that relies on a universe constituted in key strokes and clicks of the mouse. Neither offers its audience any tangible resolution beyond its series of zeroes and ones.

PART THREE:

*"Everyone wants to be Cary Grant.
Even I want to be Cary Grant!"*

- Cary Grant



Stars Vs. Celebrities

When the cameras began rolling nearly one hundred years ago in that mythical Eldorado beyond the Rockies known as Hollywood no budding film producer or tyrannical mogul could have foreseen the dawning of a new kind of super hero. In their infancy and short-sightedness the industry of film making have birth to an unusual hybrid of human being; it gave us the 'star.' These were the original test subjects; the most rarefied and intangible examples of evaporated magnitude and flickering greatness. In these last one hundred years, many names and faces have passed at twenty-four frames per



second across our movie screens for their chance at immortality. Yet, the distinction must be made between yesterday's 'star' and today's gross caricature of stardom – the celebrity.

In part, because of the well-oiled machinery of studio sanctioned public relations, stars of the golden age (1929-1959) were primarily known for their on camera histrionics and body of artistic achievement. Stars were worth money to studios on the basis and cultivation of their quantifiable talents and unique personalities. Stars were other-worldly, magical, escapist apparitions of shadow and light. No star was quite like another and none were thought of as belonging to regular society. For example, it remains inconceivable, even today, to imagine encountering the likes of Bette Davis (left) pumping gas, or stumbling across Spencer Tracy (left middle) casual fishing. Displacement from such every day and common place activities is precisely why Davis and Tracy, among others, were ideally suited for stardom.



To be certain, stars did have careers and lives removed from their press releases. Occasionally these were exploited to good effect in the gossip columns. For example; Mario Lanza (left, bottom) was a truck driver before becoming MGM's most popular operatic tenor. Though nobody could have known of his vocal talents then, in hindsight it seems implausible that he ever earned a living making common deliveries. But Lanza's rags to riches overnight success helped to perpetuate Hollywood's dreamland myth that continues to find its fuel in the American dream; adding believability for the average star gazer that their own fame and immortality might not be far behind. Nowhere is this myth more obviously exploited today than on television's **American Idol** – a proving ground in the assembly line and manufacturing of celebrity culture on the sole basis of popular opinion.



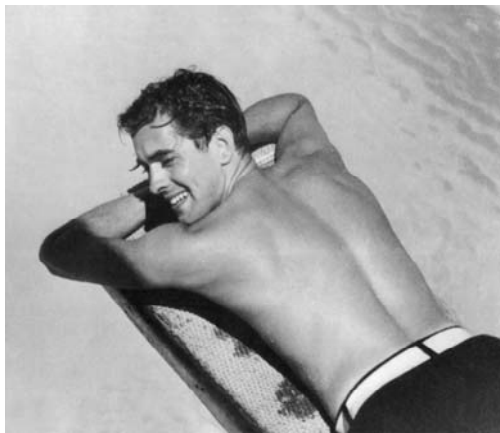
For the most part, the birth of stardom remained a mystery to the world beyond Hollywood's fabled walls, as much a mystery as stardom's fleeting longevity was and continues to be towards its human guinea pigs. Then, as it is today, stardom's only concern is with the immediacy of the here and now. What came before Lana Turner's discover as 'the sweater girl' in Schwab's Drug Store, for example, was as inconsequential to her fan base as what became of her once the cameras stopped rolling for good. What matters most to the public's voracious appetite is a star's ability to generate timelessness in a timely manner. Some stars, like Marilyn Monroe or James Dean, have been galvanized by personal tragedy and untimely deaths. Others, like James Stewart and Bing Crosby have become renewable commodities on television thanks to perennial revivals of **It's A Wonderful Life** (1946) and **White Christmas** (1954).



The talent scout of yesteryear sought out such unique diamonds in the rough. Buffing out that roughness fell to the responsibility of expert tutelage employed under the studio system. After months, sometimes years, of in-house training, the flesh and blood mortal passed from their former lives, emerging from that artistic cocoon as symbolic paragon of virtuous humanity. Technically proficient in the art of making it all look too easy and completely natural, at least on the surface, old time stars were the embodiment of human perfection. They were never ill-mannered or bad tempered. They exuded grace, elegance, charm, poise and what seemed to be an innately genuine appreciation for their fans. For example; Joan Crawford (left) is rumored to have replied to literally hundreds of thousands of fan letters yearly with personal messages – not merely autographed or even stamped salutations performed dutifully by some autonomous fan club.

If any portion of a star's private life was made public, it was usually a garble translated from carefully sanctioned junkets that had been seamlessly blended with detailed fabrications in support of their own myth.

Private lives were carefully and cleverly orchestrated by the studio's public relations as highly publicized extensions of their stars' on screen personas. Nothing was left to chance.



The price of admission into this land of indoctrinated make-believe for any budding new talent who sought it out was undoubtedly, and almost universally, a name change. Hence, Archibald Leach became Cary Grant; Francis Gumm – Judy Garland; Norma Jean Baker – Marilyn Monroe; Marion Morrison – John Wayne, and so on and so forth. Any harsh or unflattering personal history prior to that name change was easily expunged or quietly concealed. Once stardom took hold, the studio did everything in their power to maintain each façade of perfection.



(Left middle: Fox heartthrob Tyrone Power just 'happens' to be relaxing by the pool when this perfect photograph is taken. Left bottom: Jeanette MacDonald and Clark Gable share a polite – supposedly informal – moment on the set of *San Francisco* (1936).

To some stars of the golden age, studio PR was an insufferable part of their day job. The studio orchestrated not only the films that they appeared in, but also who they were seen chatting with, both on and off the set, who they arrived at the premiere with, and, in some cases, who they dated and eventually ended up marrying.

Stardom was its own career – “a cell” as Shirley Temple once reflected, “...gold plated...but still a cell.”)

If any indiscretion proved too great to cover up, as in the rape and accidental murder case of a minor involving comedian Roscoe Fatty Arbuckle, then the slate of stardom was wiped clean by the studio. The star was either exonerated from responsibility for his actions (as occurred several decades later in a similar trial involving Warner Bros. leading man, **Errol Flynn** – right - who escaped prosecution and went on to star in films, more popular than ever) or the studio disassociated itself from its star and quietly allowed him/her to quickly fade into obscurity (as happened to Arbuckle, immediately following his trial). As a result, few stars overstepped boundaries of decency and decorum to the point where their public image could irreversibly suffer.

In 1950, the U.S. government effectively shattered the autonomy of Hollywood studios. It was the end of an era and the beginning of the free agent.

However, between the studio system's demise and our contemporary state of pop culture, there has been a complete inversion of the principles behind stardom. Instead of going through a transitional period from old to new stardom, yesterday's star has morphed into today's celebrity.

Robbed of their cloistered and concocted existence behind the walls of studio kingdoms, today's celebrities (like Courtney Love, right) have had to fend publicly for themselves. Once shielded by adoring and complicit machinery, today's celebrity is increasingly scrutinized, criticized and even ravaged by the press coverage they receive. Cover stories, once the stars' best friend, have almost universally become their less than flattering nemesis.

Minus the built in guarantees of protection associated with long term studio contracts and in-house training, today's celebrity has been forced to indulge the gamut of tabloid sensationalism in order to keep their public profiles and careers alive. Hence the craft of North American acting has degenerated into an option for the celebrity to consider only after the status of celebrity itself has been achieved. Infamy is more lucrative and marketable than fame.

Compulsory bonds between talent and genuine stardom have been dissolved. Innate ability and talent fall short in their ranking behind good looks; the latter subjective and increasingly subjected to the hands of skilled plastic surgeons. As a result, this hit or miss probability of achieving and maintaining "celebrity status" has helped to populate an artistic landscape where only the most outlandish are able to survive.

The angst of fame – regardless of the generation - is that it has always been fleeting. However, past fame was considerably more durable. For example; Joan Crawford's career had weathered more than four decades of public scrutiny before being deconstructed in a tell-all biography written by her adopted





daughter. Yet despite that negative exposure, Joan Crawford's reputation as an enduring cinematic legend remains intact. In resurrecting the specter of *Mommie Dearest* (1981) on film, the self-indulgent, though perceptive incarnation of Crawford (far left) by actress, Faye Dunaway (left) seems to illustrate a fundamental realization for today's celebrity – that has increasingly become lucrative to copy, rather than emulate past personalities to help buttress their own all too brief tenures in Hollywood.



The perennial favorite among today's aspiring divas for this sort of cheapened flattery is undoubtedly linked to the iconography of 50s sex symbol, Marilyn Monroe (left). From the late Anna Nicole Smith (bottom) to Madonna (below, right), in gross caricatures of Monroe's mannerisms, dress and gregarious self parody for playing the ditzy blonde, Monroe's legacy as a sex bomb has become a chronic regurgitation used as spring board for a good number of current Hollywood celebrities. Yet, what eludes all those who aspire to emulate Monroe is the very essence of Monroe herself; that intangible quality that instantly established a great chasm and distance between Monroe and the everyday and helped to generate her inimitable mystique.



Paralleling the brief period in which today's celebrity is expected to "make a name" for themselves, is another point of distinction; that, in its very essence, today's popularity wholly lacks the resiliency of yesteryear's fame when directed pitted against it. In essence, 'popularity' diverges from a flashpoint of spontaneous combustion between a skilled press publicist and a mediocre story that has been blown out of proportion. For example, today's celebrity is often featured in divulged intimate details about their weddings, honeymoons, infidelities and divorces.

During the golden age of stardom, these topics would have been footnotes instead of focal points. However, today's rapid stamp of cookie-cutter celebrity and faux stardom have forced celebrities to achieve their fifteen minutes of fame by whatever means possible before being cast aside in favor of the next disposable property. As a result, today's celebrity appears, not only to relish scandal, but seem more at home awash in it –

Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Dept.



11/20/2003
 Photo Image of:
 NAME: JACKSON, MICHAEL
 RAC: B SEX: M
 DOB: 8/29/1958 AGE: 45
 HGT: 511 WGT: 120
 BLD: CMP:
 HA: BLK EYE: BRO
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more human in an inhuman sort of construction that is two parts tactless extrovert and one part deliberate reprobate. Hence, while many an old time star has found both the time and interest to pen their memoirs, today's celebrity quickly discovers an insufficient body of professional work to sustain a biographical account.

As complicit observers and avid contributors to this force-fed consumption of outrageousness, the layering of what would otherwise be considered unacceptable behavior from our famous people has assimilated celebrity antics as part of the acceptable craziness by our media driven culture. We expect celebrities to be obnoxious. We find nothing shocking or out of order when they start fist fights in nightclubs or are photographed in the company of under-aged prostitutes. In fact, as consumers of celebrity culture, we have come to expect so very little from our celebrities that when they reveal to us an ability to disappoint or disgust – beyond even our own expectations – our sycophantic exhilaration is akin to the rabid fascination generated by a film premiere.



To be certain, and still to be clear, classic stars rarely lived up to the banana oil of studio sanctioned PR. Some, like Ingrid Bergman, fell from grace, were given a cooling off period then resurrected anew. Others, like silent matinee idol John Gilbert were cast into the abyss of forgotten has-beens, never to return. In the face of such magnificently obtuse fiction no mere mortal could hope to compete.

Yet what is missing from the hallmark of today's celebrity is not merely the essence of living a fairy tale, but rather a complete lack of interest bordering on unwillingness to emulate the possibility of a fanciful life for the general public.



(Celebrity screw-ups one and all: top: Michael Jackson's Santa Barbara County Police mug shot. Booked on child molestation charges, Jackson was

eventually acquitted, though his reputation as the undisputed 'king of pop' has arguably suffered greatly since. Middle left: Pop tart, Britney Spears – infamous for failed marriages, indecent exposure and most recently an emotional 'melt down' that caused her to shave her blonde stresses. Middle right: a repentant Mel Gibson still looking a bit bleary-eyed after being incarcerated for a drunken brawl that included anti-Semitic remarks. Bottom: Divine Brown and Hugh Grant. Grant was dating super model Elizabeth Hurley at the time he was caught employing Brown, then a Los Angeles call girl, for 'favors'.)

Far from being role models, today's celebrities most often seem to delight in flaunting their impervious Teflon coating against any and all moral and legal codes of ethics. As far as they are concerned, the rules simply do not apply to them. The underlying inquiry for the rest of us then is why should they apply at all? This new *laissez faire* attitude that has debased freedom of speech so that it may embody any provocation that might reek of a good piece of scandal, has liberated today's celebrity into a foot-in-mouth existence for trivial sound bytes.

Yet, this defiant conviction of postmodern celebrity continues to pale behind the power of old-time stardom. The ability of today's celebrity to achieve a note of distinction goes against the contemporary grain of postmodern amnesia and cannot find originality in a world of simulacrum. As a result, today's celebrity is neither all powerful nor iconic, but briefly afforded the opportunity to flex an artistic muscle in great danger of becoming atrophied.

Consider that when Clark Gable disrobed in *It Happened One Night* (1932) to reveal that he wore no undershirt, sales of that garment plummeted to record lows. Compare the supremacy of Gable's star power to Madonna's brief affinity for the leather bustier which neither started a trend among young women nor resulted in any considerable fiscal growth for the manufacturing industry of that garment.

Perhaps the most telling example of the declining public fascination to believe in any of their celebrity's perceive clout and influence is the recent case made of Michael Moore and his *Fahrenheit 911* (2003). Designed as an anti-Bush bit of muckraking to topple the prospects of a second term presidency, not the film itself, or Moore's Oscar win for it, or Moore's subsequent campus campaigning for incumbent John Kerry found favorable resolution in the hearts and minds of voters to supplant George W. from the White House. Instead, the reinstatement of the president served to reiterate a fundamental point celebrity status – that, while it may indeed briefly capture the public's fleeting interest, in terms of proclaiming self worth and importance on the world stage, today's celebrity has a decidedly over-inflated opinion of both themselves and their contribution to the arts.

(Top: Rose McGowan arrives immodestly dressed with Marilyn Manson to an awards benefit in 1998. Middle: Clark Gable and Claudette Colbert in *It Happened One Night*. Bottom: Michael Moore flashing the peace symbol after shaking his Oscar and shouting into the camera "Shame on you, Mr. Bush!")





But the point of distinction between stars and celebrities is not hinged or even limited to popular trends in clothing or politics; not in how successful personal esthetics, tastes and attitudes are at catching the public's temporary or even lasting interest, but in how long afterward these same esthetics continue to spark renewal and consideration.

It is not enough to have mere fond recollections or even bad ones about stars or celebrities. What is of the utmost consideration is the inability of latter twentieth century celebrities to control or even generate influence over the ever-changing modes of contemplation beyond anything they themselves might have contemplated. The movie stars of the 1920s, 30s, 40s and possibly even the 1950s have retained their ability to inspire, primarily because their talent in front of the camera continues to offer only glimpses into that shadowy world beyond the footlights that the

studios fought valiantly to, and, for the most part, succeeded in keeping private.

Stripped bare on the nightly news and in entertainment-themed television shows; bombarded with the ever gossipy, though vapid and self-deprecating sound bytes from celebrities themselves – too blind to conceive that the concept of “less is more” might equally apply to them - and splashed incriminatingly on the covers of tabloid rags as common place as the avocado at the super market or pop dispenser inside the local convenience store, the proliferation of celebrity culture has, in totem, made the essence of star quality its black hole; unattainable in a world of one-hit wonders and twenty-minute disposable icons.

There is nothing left for the world of celebrity but an implosion of its already highly unstable existence. The world of film, chained to and damaged by its problematic reliance on celebrity culture to fuel its product, may eventually find new ways to recover its dignity and survive.

Regardless of the future of Hollywood itself – popular people will always be in demand on the red carpet, though in future generations it may become increasingly difficult to reflect on why our own generation had chosen its current crop of celebrities for that honor.

- N.Z.

(Above: Bing Crosby circa 1940. Right middle: Christina Aguilera strikes a rather obvious pose for publicity. Bottom: George Burns doesn't have to try nearly as hard to achieve the same affect.)



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