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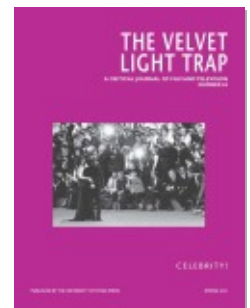
## Stardom, Celebrity, and the Money Form

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## Stardom, Celebrity, and the Money Form

**O**n mass media discourses stars and celebrities (the terms are serviceably ambiguous) are corporeal exemplars of the triumph of the individual over the collective. On a daily basis the media explore the highs and lows of stellar existence, the waxing and waning of fame, in tribute to the basic premise of romanticism, that uniquely gifted individuals transcend the fetters of mundane existence. By a sleight of hand that compromises this faith in the powers of the individual, the market so often viewed as the archenemy of creative freedom becomes insinuated as the ultimate arbiter of fame. The Kantian dictum that art is production through freedom requires its validation in the sales return and the box office (Sanchez Vazquez 186–87). When a particular star or celebrity shows signs of market impotence, another is standing in reserve to take his or her place, or, alternately, experts in spin and publicity craft another persona to restore the old vigor of commercial penetration. So it is that celebrity journalism and tabloid gossip build their own commerce-centered melodrama of personal success and redemption. The evocations of winning and losing nurture a view of life as governed by a poetics of marketability, demonstrating that the passionate expression of selfhood as commerce is the key ingredient of success.

In this article my general purpose is to contribute to the critique of this commodity-centered politics of visibility, a politics that assigns and regulates the power to represent the collective in the media. Theoretically, the apparent motors of this politics, stars and celebrities, seem to be living rebuttals to the alienation and loss of meaning that Marx saw as a central feature of production based on commodity relationships (*Early Writings* 328–32). In the figure of the star or celebrity (and even in the lessons of those who fail to achieve this status) it seems that a full and richly expressive life is possible because of capitalism. It always has been the case that commodity exchange, or

the alienation of use values, affirms self-growth and well-being for those who profit from the process (Marx, *Early Writings* 259–78). Yet for the general mass of participants in a capitalist market, the process of exchange is far from an expression of individuality. It is, rather, a blanket nomination of the self as a source of undifferentiated labor power. As market-proven examples of the uniqueness of concrete labor power, stars and celebrities, far from escaping the process of domination by capitalism, are the corporeal expressions of its sway. The means by which this appearance of empowerment through rather than in opposition to the market is produced is the concern of what follows.

### Stardom and Celebrity

It is a commonplace of scholarly and popular commentary that celebrity, particularly in its contemporary form, entails a devaluation of real accomplishment in favor of mere publicity. An early codifying instance of this view is the famous definition of the celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness,” which can be contrasted to a “genuine” doer of great deeds or a hero (Boorstin 70–74). In this view it is important on ethical grounds to distinguish between persons of real accomplishment and those who in some sense fake or forge the credentials for renown. If a celebrity is a mere creature of publicity, a star could be usefully defined as a heroic performer, one who within a context of leisure and entertainment rather than, say, a theater of war renders an exceptional performance, exceptional, that is, relative to what is publicly regarded by fellow performers, critics, and the engaged public as an objective standard of skill. In certain areas of performance (e.g., sport) there is an extrinsic objective base line for the ruminations of appreciation—the number of goals or home runs. But such a craft standard is difficult to define in areas of performance such as acting, dance, and music,

which are more centrally involved in the production of meaning. But in any area of performance the problem of defining what is good rests on a process of negotiation (perhaps contestation) between the judgment of fellow performers, critics, fans, and the general public, all of whom are likely to operate with different criteria and standards (Bourdieu 312–13).

But this is a matter of complication rather than a crisis of principle. In the case of acting—the paradigmatic home of stardom—a performance could be deemed to be heroic when it calls for an exceptionally well crafted portrayal of a complex character, say, Lear or Hamlet, which few actors in a generation can deliver. Such a judgment is possible despite the fact that the character and the setting are fictional—a possibility that Boorstin obscures with his distinction between real and pseudoevents. Another measure of performance heroism might rest on the concept of range—an actor's capacity to essay, under prevailing standards of "realism," a number of different characters with exemplary conviction. To give a contemporary example, skilled character actors such as William H. Macy are sometimes referred to as stars despite the fact that the term is used in a significantly different sense to describe individuals such as Tom Cruise, whose stardom does not rest unequivocally on character-acting ability. Allowing for differences in the mode of performance, the same distinction can be applied to all forms of performances. Such craft-centered criteria are difficult to determine; moreover, they are in danger of proposing a utopia from which the impact of market relationships has been banished.

In the English case the word "star" was first applied to the eighteenth-century actor David Garrick to suggest the mixture of professional skills and sheer force of personality, which gained audience approval (Wanko 187–89). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a star as "a person of brilliant reputation or talents, and an actor, singer, etc. of exceptional celebrity, or one whose name is prominently advertised as a special attraction to the public." If it is difficult to separate on a craft-intrinsic basis the exact contribution of the star to what is a fundamentally collaborative labor process, the force of the box office ensures that such a conundrum can be pragmatically set aside. It is possible to argue that there is some quality of personal charisma—of "it"—that makes all the other labor inputs valuable (Roach 4–12).

If stars were a well-developed commercial device in the theater, the development of the star system in Hollywood intensified the potential for a gap between acting ability

and popularity on a number of fronts. First, it became technically possible to edit a performance, retaining only those elements of an actor's behavior that fitted the overall arc of character and plot development—a protective technical facility not available in a live stage performance. Second, the production process of film, based (normally) on short takes, means that the demands on the actor's dramatic skills and stamina are short-term and permit a microcosmic focus on a single repeatable piece of behavior, something that is potentially within the reach of most performers, even those with a low energy level or a reduced capacity to emote in character. Third, through well-crafted publicity campaigns motion picture producer-distributors were able to develop a star's fame independently of the vicissitudes of the actor's "live" performance before the camera. Fourth (and this is the key determinant that reinforces the first three), the box office as force of commodification adds its own version of performance effectiveness, thereby investing a limited performance from the perspective of craft with an aura of social significance and vice versa.

Initially, then, there is reason to suppose that the terms *star* and *celebrity* are inextricably blurred. Indeed, apart from the factors already mentioned, the labor process of acting seems to "naturally" create confusion between playing a character and playing to a market-tested persona. For even in the case of character acting, where the actor attempts a maximal alteration of personality in the service of character, there is no escape from the impact of the private person of the actor on the performance. Whether on stage or screen, an actor is always a signifier with at least three intertwined referents: the private person, the fictive person or character, and the type under which these two dimensions of identity are categorically subsumed. What differentiates the star from the character actor is that the former reduces the type to an emblematic token or persona. In the purest case the character actor is bound to the context of a specific film as a diegetic character, whereas the star maintains a persona that is both interfilmic and extracinematic. By contrast, the celebrity is semantically extracinematic and transmedial, even if appearing in a specific film. There are at least two modes of celebrity appearance—as a fictional character that is little more than a virtual proxy and as a personality (as the credits have it, "as himself" or "herself"). This process of indirectly or directly collapsing the narrative identity of the character into the name of the celebrity reveals the doubling of artifice and existence exploited by celebrity acting (Quinn 156–57).

But if the ambiguity between skill and popularity, between actor and celebrity, is historically immanent to performance, I want to argue that the gradient relationship between star and celebrity, between demonstrated flair in performance and market-indexed popularity, is currently shifting. Rather than being created by stardom in some focused realm of performance, celebrity is becoming the basic condition of fame through performance. As all kinds of performers—rock stars, sports stars, literary stars, actors, politicians—circulate through the media via appearances in diverse media forms and formats, film stardom, formerly regarded as epitomizing stardom, is now just one vector through a rhizomatic space of celebrity. In such a space the construal of the worth and deserved fame of contenders by their original sphere of endeavor (if this is ever unequivocal) shrinks before the drive to maximize the media visibility of their names and the branding opportunities that come from the intensive marketing of their personae.

Film stardom is no longer, as it was in the studio system, a career centered on filmmaking, with a set of subsidiary engagements in areas such as product sponsorship and advertising. (Much the same can be said of other forms of stardom in sports and music.) Product sponsorship and advertising have gained equal or greater weight in the star's income, and fame as the result of excellence in a specific sphere has become, whether through choice or eagerly embraced necessity, an abstract glue of presence binding together a portfolio of performances (King, "Embodying"). Moreover, on the side of consumption, the market for performances has become globally dispersed so that it is no longer a matter of succeeding in the United States with "foreign" markets as a "bonus" source of profits and revenue. Rather, the challenge is to maximize revenue from a transnational market that is balkanized around a proliferating assemblage of commodity value chains such as theatrical release, DVD (and now Blu-Ray), soundtrack, "legitimate" theater spin-offs, branding, and merchandising (Miller et al. 52–58).

Viewing the development of a global market, some theorists have sought to retain the notion of stardom by a process of semantic inflation. Terms like *megastardom* and, more successfully, *superstardom* have been deployed to match the hypertrophy of windows of activity. Such terms now have a residual feel, despite recent coinage, because they still hark back to an originary sphere of performance. A superstar is a performer in one sphere of performance, say, music, and equally famous for his or her involvement

in another sphere, for example, Elvis Presley and Dolly Parton as film actors. In another variant a performer such as Michael Jordan, restricted to a particular area of performance, or any of the many film stars who become associated with luxury products develops a name that has global currency and recognition courtesy of promotional activities and publicity (Gates 42). The concept of superstardom, when not only driven by the cultivated imprecision of hype, still claims a relevant area of performance as its skill base.

Yet as any performance becomes just one node in a network of personal accumulation, there persists nostalgia for visibility based on concretely defined or focused performance skills, historically attached to the theater, music, and movies. As the primary source of personal accumulation has ceased to be a particular set of "organic" performance skills, however, the concept of performance itself has shifted from representation to presentation. The skills of self-presentation, even if acquired through a particular training, are more obviously the personal property of the performer who can accordingly possess and thereby alienate his or her appearance and style as a commodity.

As a multisourced portfolio becomes the dominant form of employment, the substance of fame shifts from visibility based on focused performance skills to visibility per se that is decentered and labile not because of some commitment to a protean vision of selfhood but because it is commercially efficacious. In this development the notion of visibility so central to stardom becomes detached from the notion of visibility as a social type—the rationale of Hollywood casting. So emerges the moment of "pure" celebrity, a state of being untainted by the complications of a specific set of craft practices or the taxonomic weight of being a type. Certainly it would be wrong to see "pure celebrity" unequivocally welcomed by all the stars (some, such as Russell Crowe, still stick to the claims of being a craftsman), but just as many rest comfortably with the lucrative opportunities of being a personal brand.

Today celebrity has become, as Boorstin presciently if prematurely suggested, radically dissociated from a particular scale of achievement, attaining the state of a universal personal service value, a kind of existential stamp that reduces particular concrete realms of achievement to an abstraction marked by a name. The advent of reality television has created a subdivision in the halls of fame where ordinary people, innocent of any performance skills or without any particular achievement, may acquire celebrity

of a fleeting kind (Rojek 20–21). But such “celetoids” must be distinguished from celebrities proper who make a career out of performing themselves. That such a career is now possible marks a new stage in the commodification of personality and the formation of exchange value out of what appear to be the natural values of the person. The interesting question is, What circumstances have inverted the normal relationship and made celebrity the general context for stardom? Pure celebrity is the latest phase of the penetration of capitalist social relations of production into the realm of personal identity that accomplishes the human rendition of the money form.

### Conceptualizing Money

In principle, anything, including a human being, can function as a money form should it acquire the status of a universal equivalent (Ingham). In order to make this clear it is necessary to address, however briefly, the theory of the money form. There are three elements or conditions to be considered. The first of these is the *commodity theory of money*, where the money form is necessarily linked to the qualities of a particular substance with some intrinsic or material value. Historically, precious metals have performed this function primarily because of their physical qualities. They possess a uniform substance that is not altered by being divided into smaller units or shaped in different forms. They are relatively scarce, and the labor time necessary to acquire them means that they are valuable in small quantities (coins) that are durable and easily portable. Such qualities, found in gold and silver, are ideal for guaranteeing the circulation of specie. To this extent they are the useful qualities of the substance that make it capable of serving as the standard of price, a store of value, and the mediator of the exchange of qualitatively different commodities. But in practice coins expressed as certain weights of gold or silver were often alloyed or clipped of portions of their weight, or they lost substance through being circulated and thereby departed from their nominal values as an expression of certain weights of metal.

Moreover, it can be noted that extensive regions of commodity exchange occurred without the presence of precious metals, which were rare or too expensive for the average trader and consumer to hold or contained too great a mass of value to cover routine and petty exchange (Muldrew). Before the advent of paper money coinage was supplemented by instruments of credit such as bills of

exchange or IOUs. So specie in performing the function of bearers of value was implicated in a kind of winnowing of substance in which the relationship between the nominal face value as, say, a crown and its metallic content increasingly becomes arbitrary. This loosening of the indexical connection encourages the view that what functions as the money form is purely a matter of convention. The development of state-issued paper currency, which, as a substance, is virtually worthless, exemplifies this point. Such fiat money permits the participants in the exchange relationship to confidently defer, beyond the confines of direct barter, the receipt of the commodity they are seeking. All that is essential to the money form is a guarantee by the state that the note or coin must be accepted in exchange for a certain quantity of goods equal to its nominal value. In the strongest version of this view the material of the money form is irrelevant (Innes).

Although the notion of “imaginary” money has an ancient history, it is from the mid-1970s, following the ending of the Bretton Woods agreement, which had tied international rates of exchange to the gold standard, that money has assumed a variety of imaginary forms, usually as a means of account or numerical value (Pryke and Allen). As the recent credit crisis has amply demonstrated, such “fictive” forms as derivatives do not just exist in the minds of commodity owners but are functionally necessary to sustain the metabolism of credit. In these circumstances any substance can act as a signifier of some standard of universal value. The link between money as a standard of account and the money substance is, in semiotic terms, not indexical but *motivated* (Klinck 25).

But there is a third view. For Marx, the essential precondition for the money form does not reside in the materiality of the monetary substance or on a mandating convention, though both conditions are relevant, but rather in the function assigned to money as a universal equivalent by the prevailing social relations of production (Nelson 1–2). To understand this we need to look closer at Marx’s account of the commodity form under capitalism.

In the simple, isolated, or accidental form of value formation one commodity expresses its value in the substance of another commodity. The first commodity (A) functions as the *relative form of value* with another commodity (B) in which its value is expressed serving as its passive equivalent. The commodity as equivalent can be any item of value, represented as multiples or fractions of the relative form of value. In this manner qualitatively different substances,



say, iron and cotton, are brought into a relationship of equivalence for exchange. Reflexively, the fact that diverse commodities exchange in certain ratios reveals that the process of exchange is driven by some underlying common substance—abstract value, or the socially average labor time required for its production (Marx, *Capital Volume 1* 139–63).

The simple form of value formation is primarily an analytical distinction. Under the normal conditions of an actually existing capitalist society, a given commodity is always implicated in an expanded and ramifying series of comparisons with other commodities, which form an entire metabolism of exchange. Thus, the value of commodity A is expressed in terms of a qualitatively different but quantitatively proportional series of commodities that, through the phenomenal form of price, are rendered as equivalent expressions of value. The process of exchange demands such quantitative comparisons as buyers seek to exchange use values embodied in commodities they do not need for use values resident in commodities owned by sellers. The unfolding series of exchanges necessitates that one commodity be excluded from the logic of relative and equivalent value that underwrites the process of commodity circulation. This commodity becomes the universal equivalent of money. So although historically gold has been regarded as the ultimate form of money, the actual money form will depend on the function a particular substance or material has within a specific set of social relations of production and exchange. If the money form is a conventionally defined substance, then that convention in itself is not arbitrary. This is evidenced by an ideological feature of capitalism that Marx terms *commodity fetishism*, the process whereby the properties of the social relations between people are, by a process of inversion, turned into the properties of things and into a relationship between things (*Capital Volume 1* 163–65). Commodity fetishism is a specific feature of the production of value under capitalist relations of production because production is organized, whether at the individual or collective level, as a private act that is only validated as collectively valuable after exchange has occurred. Individuals need to repose trust in some substance that seems to be intrinsically valuable. In this manner commodity fetishism arises as a structural requirement that isolates some substance (a precious metal, substantially worthless paper notes, or a bank account number) that plays the role of a universal equivalent of money (DeAngelis; Lapavistas, “Money”; Lapavistas, “The Social

Relations”). In this manner the products of individual and collective labor, all imbued with their specific qualities, are reduced through the money form to a quantitative and abstract value relationship between commodities, including labor power as a commodity. Moreover, whatever they may appreciate psychologically, under capitalist conditions of production and exchange individuals are required to act as though the money form were intrinsically valuable. Commodity fetishism is not a cognitive error but an ideological fantasy that structures reality itself (Žižek 28–35).

In sum, under capitalist relations of production, exchange values manifested as quantities of money or price become the primary mediator of class relationships and a constitutive expression of such relationships. By an inversion, money seems to have the power to bestow value, promoting an alienated perception that works to secure the dominance of capitalist relationships of production and exchange (Wennerlind 567–68).

### The Actor or Performer as a Commodity

If the money form is both an emanation and an instantiation of commodity relationships, in the case of the performance arts these relationships are materially and conventionally invested in the bodies of the workers. To take the individual case of the star or celebrity performer, he or she is a paid impostor, assuming a persona for the purposes of delivering a live or recorded performance. Displaying a facade is not something done by actors alone, of course. We all selectively assume a persona in interactions with others and strive to present what we believe are the positive and ingratiating aspects of our inner thoughts and feelings as context for our behavior. Ordinary people with a greater or lesser degree of skill and, perhaps, contrivance do what actors do and for that reason are prepared to entertain in a suspension of disbelief in the (more or less apparent) artificiality of performances. In assessing a performance it is the form of the interaction, its pragmatic import and effectiveness, rather than its authenticity that is primary (Goffman 15–18).

But whereas the display of the self in everyday life is a broad sociological process, the self-display of an actor or performer is a highly focused, scripted, and rehearsed activity that is functional (i.e., exchangeable) within a specific and singular performance environment. Private or intimate self-presentation does not usually entail exchange value. Public self-presentation, however, involves,

to a variable degree, the presentation of aspects of the use value of the self as exchange value. In other words, the use value of personality, the psychological and affective content of a person, varies with the context of the exchange of services, for example, as informal care for loved ones or as paid employment for comparative strangers in service work, including sex work.

Considering motion picture and theatrical employment, the exchange value of an actor is codified (and to this extent precoded by convention) through the casting process, which fits the actor by virtue of his or her apparent qualities to a repertoire of established theatrical and, by extension, social types (Klapp ch. 1). As a labor-based commodity, acting has an affiliation with mundane bodily performance. But the concrete focus of comparison and equivalence is with other actors who fit (without too costly an effort of artifice) the personality specification of a type. Not all actors can render the same type of service, but for every character type there is a large range of actors, with variable levels of skills, who can (King, “The Star”).

The actor brings to the performance process certain intrinsic properties—body morphology, looks, gestures, and acquired skills and competencies—that consciously (or even if preconscious, then increasingly consciously) permit him or her to “fit” a particular type as defined within a particular performance tradition and, in complex ways, the cultural sphere in which it occurs. Given the opportunity to play a substantial character role, one that permits the verbal manifest exploration of an “inner” life, the actor may achieve the status of a prototype, a token that is regarded as exhausting the central properties of a type. A prototype is delivered with the help of the constructive resources of the medium and, given box-office or critical success or both, becomes regarded as the embodiment of the significant core features of a type. The ostensive character-signifying attributes of the actor are his or her *use value* to audiences and fans who negotiate and adapt the framework of social types to construct a narrative of the self. The actor’s persona is the market driven selection of his or her professionally conditioned attributes to construct a self as *exchange value*.

### The Political Economy of Contemporary Hollywood

Today the traditional function of stars as guarantors of box office and major distributor involvement has been intensi-

fied through the proliferation of markets and value chains. In the Hollywood studio period of the 1920s to 1960s stars were still fundamentally employees, exchanging their labor power for a fee and working under fixed-term contracts that bound them to particular studios and required them to appear in films as assigned and undertake loan-outs as directed. As employees on personal contracts, the stars enjoyed an advanced but not quantitatively extreme level of reward compared to rank-and-file actors, for whom the Actor’s Guild set earnings minimums to be agreed upon by the studios. Profit participation, through which stars become stakeholders, was not the norm until the late 1950s. For example, James Stewart and Elvis Presley received shares of profits as defined by their respective positions in a legally fixed cascade of disbursements—back- and front-end money, gross or net points, and so on. This change, which signaled the shift in the status of the stars from employees to free-lancers and ultimately entrepreneurs, led to the superstardom context possible in contemporary Hollywood.

In the era of the event film, when almost every major release is organized as a collective event, the stars’ names function as a kind of social currency that feeds news values and sweeps aside social barriers, providing a passkey to popular culture and to elite social circles—as indicated by the recent trend in private performances by the likes of George Michael.<sup>1</sup> In relation to the mass circulation of films and derivative commodities such as merchandising and fashion lines, today’s stars guarantee, with greater or lesser potency, the exchange relationships that cascade down in an ever more complex and multilayered pattern of accumulation. Expressing Hollywood’s hegemony over global culture, today’s superstars appear to hold, like the money form itself, the qualities of universality in their person.<sup>2</sup> Now functioning as a capitalist, the star controls *fixed capital*, such as screenplays and production facilities and leased or owned production facilities, as well as *variable capital*, his or her “star labor power” and track record. He or she assumes responsibilities for the accumulation of surplus value on behalf of the studios, distributors, and corporate participants. In a winner-take-all market environment the scale of investment at risk means that the star’s “cooperation” in all phases of the development, production, and marketing of the product must be assured. Accordingly, the star’s total earnings are like executive compensation overall, tied to the film’s overall performance with percentages of the box-office gross and other sales

offered to ensure that star(s) are locked in and prepared to give total commitment to the production (Chisholm). Given the entrepreneurial perception that “[t]he commercial success of a film depends on the levels of effort chosen by its artistic and financial contributors” (174), the star becomes a fetish perceived as a generalized “creative force,” investing the fundamentally collaborative labor of film production as well as labor inputs into subsidiary niche markets with value. Where the star succeeds (and of course no one succeeds all the time), the scale of reward encourages the perception common to winner-take-all markets that success stems from the personal qualities of the fortunate few. A star multiplier effect, where small differences in skill and ability translate into extreme inequalities, follows from the interface between restricted market entry (the \$25 million club) and the massive scale of the market (Rosen 845–58). Since the work of the star as a producer is to decide which projects to pitch to the major studio distributors, he or she is no longer habitually associated with a particular genre but essays creative projects as a process of speculation. The new emphasis on special effects may be interpreted as a means of adding difference to projects without requiring the restrictive personality entailments of character acting. This development can be construed as ensuring that the stars need not depart from their market-proven personae.

Today the star’s persona functions as an asset or “natural” resource outside of the system of production, which commands a monopoly rent as an actor and profits as an enterprise participant. As I have argued, any commodity, simple or complex, that functions as a universal equivalent for a mass of heterogeneous labor power is a money form. Yet there are specific conditions within contemporary stardom that reproduce the fetishistic equation between personality and money. At the level of the obvious, stars are paid fabulous amounts of money for their services, squeezing the earning potential of less exulted players. Moreover, the intensified focus on the star, denoted by terms such as *superstar*, is a function of increased market uncertainty. As in financial markets, where derivatives have emerged as a new imaginary money form, stars function to guarantee the flow of investment by reducing uncertainty among those “risking” funds on a future outcome. Such money derivatives exist to nurture trust among those offering and those taking a gamble and, as such, are believed to intrinsically guarantee value.

## Treat Me as Money, but Treat Me

Human beings, as with any material with use value, can function as commodities. Historically, slaves, women in general, and particularly prostitutes (male or female) have served this purpose. In contemporary times the traffic in body parts and blood shows how the body can be homocidally or posthumously embroiled in the process of commodity exchange. Less grisly uses of the body can be noted that are directly related to the area of performance—as the film *SimOne* (2002) wittily demonstrates, cyberstars are possible. But beyond the confines of fiction or, rather, in a culinary admixture of the diegetic and extradiegetic, real-time examples abound. In cyberspace avatars, products of hours of work at the console, are sold as commodity identities (Castronova 6–7). On the Internet via the Hollywood Stock Exchange, stars and celebrities are explicitly equated with an imaginary money form. Participants are supplied on subscribing with a fund of Hollywood Stock Exchange “dollars.” These dollars, supplied for free, are to be used to buy shares in the stock of one’s favorite stars. The value of the stock depends on the star’s or celebrity’s box-office performance and is, in other words, value premised on the star or celebrity as a proven (unsuccessful) exchange value. In this virtual setting the personalities of stars and celebrities operate as a universal money form, equating attractiveness (to the fan-investor and to his or her estimate of the star’s universal attractiveness) with monetary values. Stardom can also be understood as a means of realizing “real” as opposed to virtual profits (or losses), a configuration that tutors the general public in Hollywood’s own perception of a star as bankable, as a human incarnation of money. Such a rendition also serves to normalize the notion of the imaginary money forms that drive the real stock exchanges.

To use an egregious but direct example, Paris Hilton sells her “presence” in a variety of markets—cosmetics, fashion, music, and acting—and earns about \$8 million a year, supplementing her considerable personal fortune from the Hilton empire. No heiress born to a life of gilded indolence, Paris is a carnal entrepreneur. For the hire of her body and presence she commands somewhere between \$150,000 and \$200,000 for a twenty-minute appearance at an upscale party—and even more in Japan (Askmen; “Filthy Rich”; Gawker; *New Zealand Herald*). Such “sheer” appearances are mixed with quasi-actorly engagements, for example, with Nicole Richie in the celebrity reality



show *The Simple Life* (2003) or as the character Paige Edwards in the movie *House of Wax* (2005) and in her crowning achievement so far as Cristabel Abbott in the searing postfeminist ugly duckling drama *The Hottie and the Nottie* (2008). In none of these “windows” of visibility do the distancing effects of impersonation or the semantic entailments of a reality TV format deplete Paris’s presence from being at one with her luminous veridical self—the self that she wishes to be real for others. Paris is always real and never virtual, as befits a merchant of pay-for-view encounters.

People have always been curious about the private lives of the famous (Sennett 221–22). Nevertheless, there has been a significant departure in how such private knowledge is revealed to satisfy this curiosity. It has become an intensively marketable commodity, sold by the stars themselves and, to their eternal complaint, by paparazzi to the tabloid media. In this process the relationship between the character and the one who acts (who need not be an actor) is reversed. Persona, rather than an expression of character, becomes the medium for the expression of generalized affect initialized by the name of the one who acts. Stars appear as themselves in the sense that each character is posed as a revelation of his or her personal hopes and desires. In this manner the contemporary star encourages (or is compelled to encourage) the development of a persona as a universal equivalent or, in more accessible parlance, a brand—a generic name for a bundle of affects that incorporates a suite of commodity goods and services (Lury 4, 32–34).

The various indexical substitutes, traces, and surrogates of stardom—the autograph, the pin-up, the magazine article, and the interview—are a kind of “paper” money resting on the “gold” standard of the star’s persona. Such exchangeable promissory notes of presence rely for their currency on the persona of the star being reaffirmed as a force at the box office.

These equations, first appearances notwithstanding, are not metaphorical but metonymic expressions—synecdoches in which parts or traces of a manifold stand in for the whole that is their indexically guaranteed home. As such they express the potentiality for the human body to act as an imaginary money form provided it is circulated through circuits of purchase as *universalized image*. It is here that the interface between a performer and imaging technologies is decisive. Actors (and to a variable degree other performers such as musicians and models that are

mechanically or digitally reproduced) are specialists in the production of body images. Moreover, performance is a process in which the aesthetic capacity of labor power is exchanged for cash through the consumption of a body image. How does the exchange of embodied images for a fee—where singular rather than average qualities are determinant—fit in with Marx’s scheme of commodity exchange?

### Pure Celebrity as an Abstract Equivalent

At first sight it might seem that the simple, isolated, or accidental form of value applies to the situation of the actor or performer. She or he provides personality-centered use values that are expressed in the equivalent value of a discrete character that aspires to be an exchange value. In this case we have a simple exchange of an individual desire for a fantasy service—hence the historic tendency to treat acting as a kind of prostitution. But simple exchange is only an analytical distinction. In reality, the total or expanded form of value pertains because acting is always a collaborative process, and, even if we consider the actors’ performance alone, setting aside the other diverse inputs that constitute a performance, the integrity of a certain character (and for that matter the dialogical relationship between characters) is governed by the conventions of typing. Inevitably, a number of actors emerge as being especially fitted by apparent skill and/or physical qualities to project a particular type. Through the recursive nature of the casting system these become leading character actors, are regularly offered work, and have the potential for stardom. The distinction between the use value of a particular actor’s personal service in the portrayal of character *as character* and its exchange value is immanent to stardom. Stars *qua stars* are required as a matter of professional success to sustain in public an equation between their veridical selves and their personae (or box-office selves) as an exchange value. In terms of the representational economy of stardom, the following, necessarily schematic genealogy applies. The earliest development of stardom in Hollywood around 1911–12 was marked by the figure of the motion picture personality in which the contrast between the star’s veridical self and his or her on-screen persona was occluded. In other words, the star’s personality was expressed through the character she or he habitually played in a type-defined narrative environment (deCordova 98–116). The film star

emerged as an embryonic expression of the use value of a concrete personality, which the actor by self-adjustment made into his or her persona. With the emergence of the studio system, the basic parameters of a star being a persona grounded in type—Chaplin as the Little Fellow, Mary Pickford as Little Mary, and so on—were marked by an increasing interpenetration of elements of the star's veridical self into the framework of type to the point that the constructed persona began to define the semantic potential of the type. The detailed evolution of this process of infusing type-based character with personality continues in contemporary Hollywood but is beyond the scope of detailed discussion here (King, "Embodying" 45–61). What can be said is that the development of the star system, its formal evolution toward celebrity, is a process of increasing *encorporation*, in which the body of the star and his or her physiognomically construed veridical self are ever more intensively employed as signifiers of exclusive possession of persona or exchange value. Increasing encorporation is the logical outcome of two broad exigencies: labor power rests on the inherent properties of the actor (albeit refined by techniques such as acting lessons, working out, cosmetic surgery, and motion picture technology) and the drive to establish a personal monopoly over a vastly expanded transnational market for star-centered services.

### The New Semiotics of Popularity

Pure celebrity is an advanced expression of fetishism in the mode of *personification* (Marx, *Capital Volume 3* 968). As pointed out above, the general mechanism of fetishism is that the qualities produced by a heterogeneous mass of socially useful labor are projected onto a particular substance as though the latter were the essential source of value. Under capitalist social relations it is through the person of the capitalist entrepreneur that fetishism is given a human expression.<sup>3</sup>

In the contemporary Hollywood cinema the compensation for the star is a form of executive compensation, which means that the star as film actor is only part of a suite of services resting on a name. In these circumstances the star is an example of capital fetishism, in which one human agent engaged in a collective labor process is identified and in public, at least, extolled as the unique source of value—the source in which all other commodity values find their expression and ratification. The celebrity is the

ultimate development in this process of personality-based fetishism.

In the era of the Hollywood studio system stars were tokens with iconic status—personalities that shared certain attributes with the social type in which they were placed by the "accidents" of physiognomy; types that reciprocally drew from and were diffused through exemplification to the public at large. At the immediate level a star existed as an impression of a person created by the kind of character he or she habitually played. So inflected, a star's likeness was reproduced as a persona on-screen and in the anchoring textual products such as the pin-up and fan magazine article. To the public at large stars were represented as belonging to a collective realm of existence known as Hollywood. In these circumstances stars were never truly singular. The greatest stars were prototypes that defined the essence of a type, but they never exceeded the notion of type altogether.

In contemporary Hollywood stars have become producers and entrepreneurs pitching projects to the major studio distributors. They are no longer habitually associated with particular genres that invest them with particular personalities but rather with the concept of efficient performance in any genre, which is the creative analogue of financial performance. Stars as pure celebrities are not tokens of a type but indices of an individual singular presence. No longer signatures of a definite cultural locale (Hollywood) or unambiguous social types, they appear as self-sufficient *brands* that stamp their presence onto fiction and actuality as existential signatures. With the onset of "pure" celebrity, the signifying relationship between a social type and its token is transfigured. The type is reductively collapsed into a token that becomes self-sufficient outside of any specified narrative or performative context. The process of the evacuation of type through encorporation, though seemingly concrete and intimately lodged, is in fact an abstraction-reduction of the qualitative, character-projecting potential of the actor to a quantitative expression of a general persona. Although ostensibly more than ever is known about the intimate existence of the celebrity or star, this is not concrete knowledge of the person but knowledge of the persona as a market-tested exchange value and object of abstract desire.

In what may be termed "Paris Hilton syndrome" representation is subordinated to self-presentation. One might say that Paris is just the latest example of the dumb blonde stereotype, but such an explanation does not recognize the

singularity or “Parisness” of Paris. I argue, then, that the reduction to abstraction can be seen to have the following aspects:

- Abstraction from a determinate and finite institutional setting: stars no longer “reside” in Hollywood, and even the production companies they control are elements of a transnational web of corporate entities.
- Abstraction from a determinate area of skilled performance or mode: self-presentation becomes an omnibus mode of performance.
- Abstraction from the status of paid employees or highly rewarded wage laborers to recipients of executive compensation and capitalist entrepreneurs.
- Abstraction from the imaginative scope of popular fantasies concerning earnings and wealth through the development of a winner-take-all competitive environment in which payment for services for a single engagement can exceed a lifetime’s average earnings several times over.
- Abstraction from character and representation, with the star’s name taking on the qualities of a rigid designator that is the same in all possible worlds (Kripke 21, 46, 78). Expressed simply, it no longer seems unforced to refer to a star as a character (e.g., Humphrey Bogart as Philip Marlowe, Sam Spade, or Rick Blaine). George Clooney, accomplished actor though he is, is George Clooney.
- Identification of star and celebrity with a brand, which is an index of abstract desire (Rojek 196 ff.), a state Paris pithily captures when she says in *The Hot-tie and the Nottie*, “A world without orgasms is like a world without flowers.”

Certain developments, such as the event film and digital processes that seem to downgrade the contribution of the star (use of green screens and avatars) to that of an uber-marionette, flaunting the power of the cinematic apparatus to create the diegesis, nonetheless rely on the “zero-degree” reacting of the star (e.g., Jason Statham) to valorize and sustain a digital inscription of the real as “real.” These developments underpin the new regime of pure celebrity,

of fame for being the (veridical) self. They represent a shift in the grammar of reference beyond the constraints of type and prototype toward a more abstract mode of being (Braudy 554–55). When these circumstances arise, it is appropriate to discuss a condition in which fame and reward are no longer in a linear relationship with a specific realm of endeavor but refer to the universal process of being paid for performing. With pure celebrity, performance labor attains the status of a universal equivalent of labor in general and acting labor in particular. I term this new star-audience relationship the *autographic* mode of stardom (King, “Embodying”).

### The Ideology of Pure Celebrity

The star in any capacity—as actor, performer, or pure celebrity—is based on the recognition of a premium rent for an embodied personality. Acting epitomizes the personal service occupation in which the labor process and the generation of value are inscribed onto the body and person of the laborer. In virtue of this material reality the ideology of stardom is in one aspect a celebration of the value-producing powers of labor. More broadly as a popular cultural form, stardom epitomizes the notion that freedom is possible through the sale of labor power. Under the capitalist conditions of employment, the employee entering into a labor contract is conceived as the owner of his or her person who can freely alienate or sell his or her capacity to labor. The appearance of freedom is on close analysis contradictory because it postulates, on the one hand, an autonomous or free individual and, on the other hand, the alienation of the “natural” rights that define the person as autonomous. Moreover, the paradigm of free labor rests on the political fiction that one piece of property in the person, labor power, is alienable. But in reality labor power is a capacity, not a thing that can be physically and morally separable from the person (Pateman).

Stardom in general (in whatever context or realm) is a living endorsement of the inseparability of labor from the person. What has changed, as argued above, is that the promotional investment of the studio system in iconic resemblance has transpired into a more performative relationship in which the language of doing, of performing, replaces an older, more settled language of being. Nested in a performative space outside of representation, contemporary stars have become general symbols of the exigencies of being performers in an intensively ramified market for

acting services. The highest paid performers receive a monopoly rent for resources that seem exclusively embodied in their personalities.

The very notion of acting and performing as eponymous labor—as productive of fame—is generally connected to the idea of the recognition of the concrete use value of the worker, a recognition taken, of course, to the ultimate degree of defining all work as a kind of self-expressivity. This has a popular appeal in itself, but it is redoubled by an association with the notion of money (the wage, the salary, the fee) as the one form of self-mastering freedom that capitalist social relationships are structured to accord axiomatic respect (Lebowitz 95). Money is perceived as destabilizing the demeaning judgments of worth associated with ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and gender. With it comes mobility, freedom to choose, the ability to control one's fate, and the capacity to alter one's social position (Furnham and Argyle 42–44). Money values exchanged for personal services are an example of personal worth receiving societal recognition, and in this manner reports of the fabulous earnings of stars and celebrities come to bear a resemblance to various forms of games of chance—the lottery win, the bet, the unearthing of a very valuable piece of memorabilia, the lucky break, and so on. Indeed, stardom, with its notion of the lucky break, is a kind of game of chance or a means to ensure that one is rescued from the predictable fate of the collective.

But for all its apparent utopian force, the sublime of “pure celebrity” is not the supersession of the wage relationship but its celebration as the prerogative of particular individuals who seem to possess a market-chastened singularity. Celebrities are now presented as the affective epicenters of the range of human potentialities marshaled under the rule of the market.

Pure celebrity is based on an elite development of tokenism—the process of selecting certain individuals from subaltern categories to prove that anything is possible. Under the guise of a celebration of the creative potentialities of labor in general, pure celebrity develops as a fetish of capitalism that insinuates that one individual—normally the entrepreneur or capitalist—is the possessor of a catalytic kind of labor that alone can valorize the labor of others.<sup>4</sup> This is literally true in the entertainment business, where others do not get to work without the star's or celebrity's involvement, but it has a more general resonance. The celebrity encourages ordinary individuals who are categorically similar (or able to negotiate their image categorically

through self-fashioning or digital morphing) to seek their share of the “currency” of visibility as clones. But such encouragement involves both literal purchases and also a symbolic “tax” on self-fashioning. For, as the once type-governed celebrity equates to an imaginary money form, he or she becomes the one whose incarnation of a type dominates the category. This domination, further encouraged by popular media ever in search of gossip and intrinsically entertaining human interest stories, produces a value ordering that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) judges the value of the best look-alikes or the closest approximations to the type. Fans everywhere are free to poach, but most often this “outlaw” activity only occurs within the confines of a status hierarchy that acknowledges (or rejects) claims to share the qualities that mark the exchange (or name) value of the celebrity.

### The Limits of Pure Celebrity

Pure celebrity is not without limits. One limit is the relatively short life cycle of fame. But short-term success can have a significant impact on the self-conception of fans, especially teenagers, and the earnings curve of the celebrity can produce a lifetime of earnings within a very short career. At the same time, it seems that the “shelf life” of a star or celebrity has attained the durability of an entertainment elite with considerable power and the capacity to pass on to his or her offspring a marketable name. The rapid turnover of stars has always answered to a belief in the democracy of fame. But the omnipresence of the same names—not merely across time but more extensively through a ramified space of visibility that saturates the present—gives an impression of monopoly. This is only redoubled by the divisive effects of the sheer scale of economic inequality that underpins “pure” celebrity. Public resentment and the questioning of fame are apparent on Web sites and in chat rooms and are well-worn themes in celebrity programs and articles. It appears that the general public admires the celebrity's success but also knows that it rests on a sharply exclusive scale of reward, prestige, and opportunity that most cannot even dream of attaining.

The loss of this performed connection to the ordinary, with its stretching of notions of reward for merit to a point of breakdown, is the Achilles' heel of pure celebrity. The celebrity today is only one step away from being rich without the justification of talent—from revealing, in other words, that celebrity eminence is simply an effect of the



development of global markets in brands and personalized service commodities. In their private lives stars are simply very wealthy people and not, as they once seemed, the better-off aunts and uncles of a less fortunate audience. Moreover, as the endless trail of largely CGI-related credits of “tent pole” event movies suggests, the collective powers of filmmaking are straining at the limits of pure celebrity and behind that the confines of bourgeois individualism.

## Notes

1. “I’m your man! George Michael paid £1.7 million for a 75 minute New Year Concert,” Web, 29 Jan. 2007, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk>. To their credit, Bruce Springsteen and U2 refuse to engage in these increasingly venal activities, which indicate the extent to which celebrities and stars are elite servants rather than popular heroes. See <http://www.digitalspy.co.uk>.

2. One might note that there are limits to the “pluridimensionality” of the star and celebrity persona. Many A-list Hollywood stars are reluctant to reveal that they make substantial earnings from appearing in commercials in Japan (Fabiola).

3. Capital fetishism takes two forms—interest and profit of enterprise. The first is an evolved form of money fetishism, the latter, a junior form of fetishism of “wage” labor that focuses on the labor power of the capitalist. Both forms in their own mode of existence—as the reward for the efforts of the individual entrepreneur and the reward for investment—conceal the exploitation of wage labor (Elster 96–99).

4. Sylvester Stallone, a long-time participant in the multimillionaire superstar club, has some shrewd advice for David Beckham reminiscent of Machiavelli’s advice to the prince about the dangers of flaunting wealth: “I think he will be great for soccer in America but if he wants to be taken seriously he might want to tone down the other side of his life—the high society side. In America, if you’re an athlete you have to look like an athlete. If you’re flashy then the whole thing can turn badly against you. The U.S. audience doesn’t like the Rolls Royces and the showy lifestyle—they like the humility. In America, showing off the superstar lifestyle can be perceived as, ‘Look at what I’ve got and you don’t.’ He’s got to give soccer a blue collar, salt of the earth image or it won’t work, otherwise it will become elitist like polo. He needs to adapt to the mindset” (World Entertainment News Network).

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