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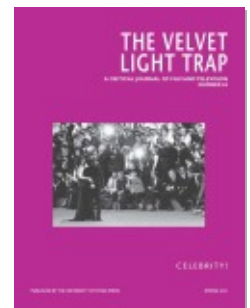
## Dreaming a Dream: Susan Boyle and Celebrity Culture

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## Dreaming a Dream: Susan Boyle and Celebrity Culture

**S**usan Boyle's audition of "I Dreamed a Dream" (*Les Misérables*) on the popular reality format *Britain's Got Talent* (2007–09) rapidly became a phenomenal YouTube hit, catapulting her into media visibility on a global scale. Indeed, viewings of her audition performance leapt from 1.5 million to 5 million in under twenty-four hours (Holmwood). But after being variously hailed as an exceptional talent or a "hairy angel" (Smith), the speculation surrounding the forty-eight-year-old Scottish church volunteer took on a different tone as media coverage speculated whether she would "triumph or crack" (Brook and Carrell) as the eve of the final loomed.

Debates about the value, "state," and future of modern fame have become increasingly pervasive in academic and popular media contexts, and "ordinary" people have emerged as a fertile site for the circulation of such discourses. Whether seen as emblematic of the "cultural decline" thesis (in which we have witnessed a "regrettable" depreciation in the currency of fame) or as attesting to the emergence of a "populist democracy" (in which fame has become a social process that pivots on an egalitarian rhetoric of "leveling down") (Evans), "ordinary" people have been foregrounded as emblematic of "change" in celebrity culture.

Yet despite this emphasis on the "new," it is important to recognize continuity—especially with regard to the mythic or ideological functions of fame. For example, the mediation of the "ordinary" person-turned-star has historically dramatized the possibilities of the success myth (Dyer), in which "lucky breaks," hard work, "talent," and "ordinariness" are the central hallmarks of stardom. This is especially true of the reality talent shows such as *Pop Idol*, *X Factor*, and *Britain's Got Talent*, which (unlike *Big Brother*, for example) continue to peddle more traditional myths of fame. Indeed, figures such as Boyle are invoked as culturally

reassuring evidence of the fact that "talent"—in itself an ideological construct that is never clearly defined—still exists (and is waiting to be "discovered") in a context in which "merit" appears to be an absent discourse where celebrity is concerned.

Yet such programs undoubtedly work through more traditional myths of fame within a more self-consciously commercialized modern celebrity culture. In this regard they are often paradigmatic of a competing war between more traditional myths of fame (in which fame is explained by the existence of an "innate" attribute or talent) and the increasing prevalence—since the postwar period—of manufacture as an explanation for fame (with an emphasis on image construction, packaging, "hype") (see Gamson). Given that the prevalence of manufacture and commerciality offers a potential challenge to more elite (and thus less egalitarian) explanations of fame, particular representational tropes have emerged to paper over the apparent disjuncture here. As Joshua Gamson has explained, one such trope is the increased emphasis on audience agency ("*you choose*"), which appears to insist, "If *you* don't like me, *you* can throw the spotlight onto someone more 'worthy'" (271, emphasis in original).

But in relation to reality TV, the question of audience agency is also invoked with regard to the relationship between "ordinary" people and the ethics of fame. In contrast to the emphasis on a "democratizing" impulse, reality TV has often been yoked to the worst "excesses" of a deeply commercialized celebrity culture in which ordinary people are exploited and used up before being "spat out" by the media machine. Indeed, when it was announced that Boyle was admitted to the Priory clinic after losing to dance troupe Diversity in the final of the show, it was not simply the producers of the program who were invoked as dangerously exposing the singer (who had

reportedly also suffered from a mental defect since birth) to the pressures of fame: the viewing public was also seen as colluding in this “irresponsible” act. (After all, hadn’t “we” ultimately failed to judge her as the winner?) Either way, the trajectory of Boyle’s experience with notoriety reignited debates about the ethics of care provided by reality shows.

This framework is particularly resonant with regard to the audition clip that catapulted Boyle into media visibility. As Boyle appears on the audition stage, the choreography of the sequence immediately invites the question, What sort of pleasures will this performance provide? She explains that she is unemployed and single, has “never been kissed,” and lives with her cat, Pebbles; she then elaborates on her dream to become a successful singer in the mold of Elaine Page. We then shift between a series of reaction shots in which the panel of judges as well as members of the audience express a combination of disbelief and scorn at what is seen as the apparent disjuncture between Boyle’s physical appearance, social status, and professed aspirations. In this regard the sequence offers a somewhat predetermined subject position in which a superior, judging gaze is directed at a seemingly “deluded” subject, her middle-aged status and physical appearance apparently making her desires even more unacceptable than those of the typically young, fame-seeking “wannabe.”

In this respect it is clear that the cultural construction of Boyle intersects with wider gender ideologies that presently structure the meanings of celebrity culture. Both academic and popular attention is now being given to the highly *gendered* imbalance that differentiates the coverage of male and female celebrities, given that current codes for celebrity representation tend to synthesize sexist and ageist logics (Negra and Holmes). Although this is a wider topic that cannot be considered in detail here, it is clear that current celebrity representation is “punishing of young and midlife women in related, but distinctly different, ways” (Negra and Holmes). Indeed, it is worth noting that the apparent “disjuncture” between perceived appearance and perceived talent was not cued as so pronounced when Paul Potts, the overweight opera singer who won the first series of *Britain’s Got Talent*, auditioned in 2007: judge Simon Cowell noted, “I wasn’t expecting that,” while fellow panelist Piers Morgan agreed, “You have an incredible voice.” Yet the fact that Boyle’s performance was seen as so utterly incongruous with her physical appearance was not completely overlooked by journalists writing in the



Figure 1. Susan Boyle dreams her dream (*Britain’s Got Talent*, 2009).

“quality” press. As Tanya Gold observed in the *Guardian*, “Why are we so shocked when ‘ugly’ women can do things, rather than sitting at home weeping and wishing they were somebody else? Men are allowed to be ugly and talented. Alan Sugar looks like a burst bag of flour. Gordon Ramsay has a dried up riverbed for a face.” Yet the initial reaction of the crowd at Boyle’s audition suggested that she might “be hanged for her presumption” that she might be worthy of the media spotlight (Gold). Furthermore, when Boyle wiggled her hips and explained that her “ordinary” life was “only one side of [her],” judge Piers Morgan winced while the audience tittered with embarrassment, and as Gold later noted: “Didn’t Susan know that she wasn’t supposed to be sexual?” In observing how Boyle subsequently had her appearance “picked over” in many media forums, it was later observed that “fairy stories are full of woodcutter’s daughters who get transformed into princesses, but

what's happened to poor Susan Boyle has much more in common with a freakshow" (Smith).

The promise and expectation of physical transformation referenced in this quote may also elucidate the fervor with which Boyle attracted attention in America (especially when reality TV stars are conventionally national, rather than international, in appeal). Indeed, the expectation that Boyle might dramatize the possibilities of the reflexive self (Giddens) so central to the transformative, consumerist, and individualist ethos of makeover culture appeared to be especially pronounced in her U.S. circulation and reception. To be sure, the fact that constructions of fame are gendered is hardly a startling revelation, but the circulation of Boyle (and the intensity of her media visibility and rapid temporal rise to fame) appears to articulate these in a condensed and thus microcosmic form. Furthermore, while Boyle might initially be invoked as reassuring evidence of the fact that real "talent" still exists (and that it can be discovered by reality shows), she has simultaneously been constructed as the "freakish exception that proves the rule" (Gold). In this regard, her construction and reception shore up conceptions of acceptable/"unacceptable" norms of femininity (especially as endorsed by celebrity culture), while she is simultaneously hailed as evidence of a democratized fame culture—even though by "raising Susan up, we will forgive ourselves for grinding every other Susan into the dust" (Gold). As Turner reminds us, fame is

a very curious culture site in which to look for evidence of "democratization," given that, no matter how much it appears to expand, celebrity will always be a "hierarchical and exclusive phenomenon, no matter how much it appears to proliferate" (78).

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