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Toxic: The Implosion of Britney Spears's Star Image

ne of a series of images that captured Britney Spears's highly public mental breakdown, the picture included here catapulted the starlet to another kind of fame, while the scale of her mental and professional collapse thrilled and fascinated global media audiences. I will focus here on two aspects of this collapse. It immediately became a point from which her star image could not return, creating an immense media appetite for subsequent signs of Britney's collapse. (This is adeptly satirized in the *South Park* episode "Britney's New Look," where the flailing starlet despairingly shoots herself in the head, leading the media to joke about her new image—just a jaw and the base of her skull.) Equally significantly, this notorious head shaving was a public event staged in front of paparazzi cameras. The resultant images documented her collapse through a kind of shot breakdown reminiscent of the work of Raymond Bellour, David Bordwell, and others. The sequences that resulted, a collage of various paparazzi images, traced her activities at Esther's Hair Salon in Tarzana, California, after she abruptly left a Caribbean rehab facility. While the moments leading up to this action were traced on video, the act itself was only captured in still images. If Britney's actual shaving was at some level missing from the record, what remained was something less immediate but possibly more revealing. These images displayed a variety of her emotional reactions—the innocent, lost soul of the image shown here contrasted, for example, with some momentary strong, satisfied, and defiant stares, some gleeful looks, some distanced contemplation, some glassy-eyed looks, and some tears. The coherence this series resists evokes a fragmented persona, spurring discussion, debate, and even art as the public rushed to judge, diagnose, and fill in the many gaps.

Although so much can be—and has been—said about these images (a Google search for "Britney Spears shaves

her head" returns approximately 571,000,000 hits), I want to pursue two lines of inquiry, considering the more general implications for studies of celebrity. Briefly, I wish to explore what these images suggest about the difference between stardom and celebrity, recognizing that both are intertwined and implicitly self-referential. These are now iconic images, contributing to our narratives of stardom and fame as well as anchoring all subsequent images of Spears's life and performances. Second, I want to think about this as a public performance and consider its implications for the ways celebrity, stardom, and fame fuse public and private for mass consumption. A mental breakdown can be considered essentially private at several levels, essentially interior, emotional, pointing to the mind,

Figure 1. Britney Spears, halfway shorn (x17online.com, 2007).

not the body. Such events are typically hidden from the media. In an era where sex tapes have become a career move, cameras are ubiquitous, and global distribution is a keystroke away, it is perhaps expected that such intimate images circulate publicly. While media exposure may have precipitated or even caused this collapse, Spears's customary habit of disclosing her innermost angst on TV suggests that at some level she intended this performance to be widely distributed. While not a measured act of rebellion against dominant standards of female beauty or her handlers' control over her life, Spears's actions nonetheless evoked an awkward effort to restage an image that continually escaped her control.

Spears's image had always echoed that of other stars/starlets. She was a mass-produced blond pop princess, one of many designed for an ephemeral teen market. At the time of her collapse she was a twice-married starlet fast reaching her expiration date. Like her music career, her private life followed a well-worn path. Her most erratic actions, most notoriously, a brief and unexpected Vegas marriage, were not original; while she was photographed getting out of a car without underwear, she was following in the steps of her then friends Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton. The head shaving was different. Immediately, it distinguished her and her struggles, opening up a more fascinating spectacle as well as a more troubled, even complex, interior self. Media coverage shifted from her body to her mind as the self-destructive Britney suddenly became a more interesting individual, even if, like Judy Garland, Marilyn Monroe, and others, this promised early destruction.

Images of Spears shaving her head not only exploded her star image but also moved her away from stardom and toward celebrity. At some level stardom depends on work—it is exhibited through performances, produces commodities, and evokes a narrative of struggle, talent, determination, and upward mobility. The star's work defines an on- and off-screen (or record, or video) self, cleaving his or her image into public and private. As P. David Marshall notes, the star text itself evokes something unique and personal—even the most prepackaged pop stars connect at an intimate level with their audience, expressing their innermost thoughts, even if someone else composes their songs, arranges them, produces them, and styles their videos (150–84). Pre-head shaving, post-K-Fed, the media had eagerly awaited a Britney comeback, praising her more polished styling on the *Late Show with*

David Letterman. Afterward she was mired in the world of celebrity, not the world of stardom. Unlike stardom, celebrity feeds on exposure without work, highlights the desire for fame without effort, and focuses on private lives lived in public. Both scandal and routine are the fabric of celebrity journalism, and, after her head shaving, Britney could be stripped bare of her work and studied as pure media event. Moving between catastrophes, scandals, and boredom, media images of her driving aimlessly around LA spoke of another kind of fame—a life without work, without substance, seemingly existing to feed online gossip sites and tabloid weeklies. Any effort to regain control was futile—the fragility documented in photos like the one shown here only supported court actions to put her under her father's guardianship, reinfantilizing a starlet who had struggled to assert maturity. Her subsequent album, *Blackout*, and her notoriously catatonic MTV appearance only demonstrated the star as product, devoid of the ability to participate in her work but contractually obliged to put out something to capitalize on her celebrity coverage. Her celebrity now drove her stardom, threatening to occlude it, as her work seemed devoid of her agency. Indeed, her subsequent work voided some of the postfeminist strength associated with strong, glamorous femininity as the blond self that reemerged only did so under the court order that effectively prevented her from having any agency, placing her under her father's guardianship.

These images of Spears at Esther's salon further testify to the ways contemporary celebrity media participate in the erosion of privacy. The site of Spears's breakdown—a strip mall hair salon—ironically resonates with discourses of consumerism, self-improvement, beauty culture, and standardization that are inextricable from celebrity culture and stardom. But it was also a markedly public place, allowing more access to paparazzi. It may have been a matter of chance, but Spears came here—as opposed to going home or some other private space—and did so in the company of a cohort of paparazzi. It is possible that there are few places private enough to have a breakdown on this scale when one has her degree of fame, but still this action has to be contextualized in relation to Spears's other uses of the media to assert her emotional and private life. From *Chaotic* to the notorious NBC/Matt Lauer interview and her more recent MTV documentary, *Britney: For the Record*, Spears has used broadcast media as a public confessional, hoping to control her image even as most of these texts backfired. As Spears habitually staged her most emotional

moments in public, it is possible that her breakdown had to be public to be a fit response to these pressures. Her actions suggest a figure whose intimate life has become so public that millions have to witness her experiences and emotions to validate that they exist. In turning herself into representation, Spears reveals that she is like us, a spectator-participant in celebrity culture.

In many of the photos taken at Esther's salon Britney looks into the mirror, studying her work and the image she has produced. These images point to another aspect of celebrity culture. At heart, celebrity is a form of self-staging, one that simultaneously provides the culture with a site for self-examination. Celebrities fascinate as they allow us to explore ways individuality is fashioned, acting as microcosms for social success. This image fits this context as it displays our fascination with seeing what is underneath, what Photoshop and other digital tools, lighting, costuming, hair, and makeup are hiding, here unmasking Britney physically and emotionally. Britney's looks at herself in this suburban site of self-improvement reveal that she

shares this same fascination with unmasking herself. As her hair extensions are revealed, the public can witness the artifice that goes into constructing contemporary stardom. Yet these images foreground the fragility of this very consumerist self—mutable, in crisis, unstable—as this becomes the ultimate celebrity performance in terms of its media ubiquity. For an audience exhausted by perfect images of stars, nothing entrances more than the star's own public exposure of the truth—that this perfection is unsustainable, damaging, and even unwanted. Yet there is no radicalism here, only voyeurism, appealing to our more vicarious desire to see celebrities unmasked, collapsed. Still, the traces of ambiguity, the shifting expressions on Spears's face make these images tantalizingly incomplete, awaiting our commentary in the form of art, gossip, or empathy.

Works Cited

Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.