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Views and Reviews: Celebrity as Fantasy Screen

We all have lives worthy of watching. We all have lives worthy of selling.

—Hal Niedzviecki

By Review Editor Andrew Houston

Celebrities exist because people have the capacity to fantasize. Psychoanalysts in the tradition of Jacques Lacan have been stating this for years. Fantasy designates our ‘impossible’ relationship to the person or thing that we most desire. Fantasy is usually conceived as a scenario wherein a person’s desire is realized. This basic definition is adequate so long as we take it literally; that is, what fantasy stages is not a scene where desire is fulfilled or fully satisfied, but the contrary. It’s a scene that realizes—that stages—desire as such. An important insight of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed. It is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of a person’s desire, to specify its object, and to locate the position the person assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that a person is constituted as desiring; in other words, according to Lacanian scholar Slavoj Žižek, “through fantasy we learn how to desire” (Žižek 6).

Our attraction to celebrities is a lesson in how to desire, and whether or not this is a good thing has a lot to do with how desire is staged and thus, how it is learned. According to Lacan, the root cause of desire is the *objet petit a*—the chimerical focus of fantasy or the object or person that attracts our desire. At the same time (and this is its paradox), it is posed retroactively by this desire. If this fantasy attraction threatens to disrupt the rational order of our life, the balance between the realm of fantasy and the realm of reality, then psychoanalytic therapy advises that we live the fantasy to its fullest in order to realize that the power the object or persona of our desire has over us is in fact a void. It appears as such once the ‘staging’ is disrupted, and from a different perspective, we can see how the psychical energy of our investment works.

Lacan’s definition of the *objet petit a* includes a quite ordinary, everyday person that, as soon as he or she is “elevated to the status of the Thing,” starts to function as a kind of screen—an empty space on which we project fantasies that support our desires about this person-turned-celebrity (Žižek 133). Here, the celebrity is a kind of void filled in with everyone’s fantasy. While this is a pretty accurate description of most celebrities (especially actors who gain notoriety by convincingly transforming from one character into another), it seems that an even better example of Lacan’s object cause of desire is the celebrity persona we now encounter online. Thanks to the ‘staging’ of digital technology on the Internet, we now have the girl or boy next door transformed into “Balloon Boy” or “Sweepstakes Boy” or “Dog Shit Girl”¹ (and this of course makes these individuals the object the fascination for millions of viewers).

Hal Niedzviecki calls this “peep culture”, and his book about the subject, “The Peep Diaries” offers many valuable insights into the staging of desire and celebrity in our contemporary world where digital communication is continuously altering the way in which celebrity status is defined, discussed, and disseminated globally. A central tenet of peep culture is that what you, or I, or anyone is doing, thinking, or feeling is as valuable and as significant as what anyone else is doing, thinking, or feeling. As Niedzviecki explains, “[w]e’re all equally interesting, equally capable of providing advice, catharsis, distraction, companionship, and entertainment. We all have lives worthy of watching. We all have lives worthy of selling” (Niedzviecki 31).

When Niedzviecki wrote *The Peep Diaries*, he set out to explore the relationship between popular culture, capital, technology, and the ways in which people were relating to one another and creating community in an increasingly digitized landscape. According to Niedzviecki, peep culture emerges from and is made possible by a popular consumerist culture that values hyper-individualism above all as a path to fulfillment and success. He states:

The celebrity, the ultimate hyper-individual, a mythical yet real creature who is everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing, is presented to us as the paramount being. We aspire to be celebrities, and our Peep culture gives us an entrée into that world. Meanwhile our desire to mimic the celebrity lifestyle by generating our own personal mythologies for consumption, complete with press releases, videos, moment-by-moment updates and more, has been noted, and indeed encouraged, by the for-profit culture makers. Increasingly, they are realizing that the survival of their kind of gatekeeping, block-buster entertainment is bound up in perpetuating the evolving myth of the star next door. Keep watching because you might be next. Pop merges with Peep. Talk and reality TV merge with the rise of celebrity gossip. This strange amalgamation of chitchat and caught-on-tape becomes the main entertainment commodity of the twenty-first century—a surefire strategy to sell tickets, boost ratings, get hits, peddle books and magazines, and otherwise generate dollars” (Niedzviecki 266–267).

Niedzviecki makes a convincing argument for how peep culture is shifting the context and content of celebrity toward a more banal, populist manifestation. In this shift, the celebrities of peep culture are almost too present; they are in a way formless content, hardly distinguishable from one another, as their staging on the Internet seems to force upon us an obnoxious, over-exposed spectacle. In this transformation, Lacan would identify the shift from *desire* to *drive* in our relationship to this media. The object of desire indicates the void of that unattainable value – let’s call it the talent of the performer – that sets our desire in motion. The over-exposed personas of Peep exemplify more an inert object, the embodiment of

problematic enjoyment, the public gawking at the spectacle on the screen, for example, around which the drive circulates. This transformation from the staging of desire to that of drive exists within the fact that desire is by definition caught in a certain dialectic: it can always turn into its opposite or slide from one object to another. The drive, on the other hand, is inert. It resists being enmeshed in a dialectical movement, as it circulates around its object, fixed upon the point around which it pulsates (Žižek, 134).

This situation may seem hopeless, yet within the drive toward evermore sensational moments of over-exposure, Niedzviecki comes to a surprisingly optimistic insight about how peep culture might hold some hope for people when he says:

Peep culture is our twisted answer to the problem of the dehumanizing of humanity. When we present ourselves to be watched and commented on, we are, ironically enough, attempting to reclaim our individuality on our own terms. It’s our attempt to show not how special and exceptional we are, but how ordinary and normal and deserving of everyday human interaction we are. Basically we’re trying to show that we are human beings worthy of recognition just for being who we are. In that way, Peep is a reaction to, and a symptom of, our technocratic age of quasi-community, nonstop marketing, and global celebrity gossip (Niedzviecki 27).

This idea of exposing oneself to an almost obscene extent as a means of conveying something deeply personal was also understood by Lacan. Insofar as fantasy stages the psychological dimensions of our desires or drives, it aims at this “ex-timate kernel” in the self, or at that which literally is our exposed-intimate nature (Žižek 129). Of course there’s nothing new about people exposing themselves in this way, nor in the manner addressed in the above passage. What’s unprecedented is the staging; the technology and the marketing have brought a massive audience to witness a kind of exposure that in most cases is best left to the privacy of a few friends or the office of a qualified therapist.

The *Peep Diaries* concludes with some important observations about why the ubiquity and reach of peep culture encourages widespread rash judgment, too much histrionic behaviour, and ultimately why “turning us all into walking, talking, recording and transmitting computers might not be such a hot idea after all.” Indeed, the payment for moments of “righteous transparency” is “hundreds of thousands of moments of prurient invasion—videos and photos that nobody wants to be in, making money for people and companies profiting off the misery, unhappiness, and delusions of others” (Niedzviecki 274). I began reading this book with the intention of discovering how best dramaturgy and theatre practice might collaborate with this newly defined phenomenon, with this growing culture of online performance. Given the sheer popularity of peep culture, it’s tempting to try and find

ways that theatre can play along, so to speak. For example, to adapt dramaturgy to the language, imagery, and means by which identity is staged through peep media. Yet I'm now convinced of the opposite; that theatre has much to offer peep culture, and perhaps especially those who have had their fill of it. Theatre happens on a scale—between people and in real time—in such a way that addresses fantasy and the void of celebrity without the latter becoming an ontological vacuum or an exploitative freak show for the consumption of millions of viewers.

In this issue's *Views & Reviews* section, there are a variety of writings that explore how different practitioners navigate the terrain of celebrity. There are personal (not prurient) accounts here, where theatre is seen to offer meaningful exploration not exploitative over-exposure. In the way that we can preserve both mystery and questions, as well as suspend the hysterical exposure of technology and our rush to judge, there is hope for theatre in the world of peep.

This is my last issue as a Views & Reviews Editor. I want to thank Rosemary Clark-Beattie, my trustworthy and talented copy editor, who always had the patience of a saint to wait for my late material and always had the best advice for my writing. I would like to welcome Jenn Stephenson and Natalie Alvarez, who will both replace Laura Levin and I as editors of this section. I can't think of a cooler or more capable pair to be editing this section, and I look forward to reading their work for years to come.

Notes

- 1 These are examples of people who have gained celebrity status due to a well-publicized spectacle, such as a hoax (Balloon Boy), an experience of good fortune (Sweepstakes Boy), or a bizarre incident of apparent callous disregard on the part of a young woman and her dog that turned into widespread, vitriolic criticism (Dog Shit Girl).

Works Cited

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- Žižek, Slavoj. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture*. Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1995.

So They Think I Can Dance: A Reflection on Bluemouth Inc.'s Dance Marathon

Dance Marathon, by Bluemouth Inc.,
Harbourfront World Stage, Enwave Theatre,
Toronto, February 4–7, 2009.

By Melanie Bennett

I am amazed by the current desire a lot of people have to become famous, and the assumption that it is an easily attainable goal. In the past, celebrity status was reserved for a few elite individuals who demonstrated extraordinary success in their profession as an entertainer, artist, athlete, politician, philanthropist, activist, or entrepreneur. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, and reality television, however, have broadened the concept of celebrity status to include *anyone* capable of claiming the spotlight. While obsessive fixation on celebrities in the traditional model are more outrageous than ever before (think Oprah, Brangelina, and Obama), unremarkable people are taking extreme measures to promote themselves in ways that captivate the media's attention. For instance, the highly-publicized separation of Jon and Kate (and their eight children) and Richard and Mayumi Heene's "balloon boy" hoax are among the faces of these new average Joe celebrities whose fame will have expired by the time this article is printed. In the spirit of *CTR 141*'s "celebrity" theme, I find it only fitting to review a performance that explores the recent trend of everyday people becoming a focus of entertainment.

Harbourfront Centre's World Stage, as part of their Fresh Ground new works commissioning programme, produced

Participants at *Dance Marathon* by Bluemouth Inc.
Photo by Nancy Piava, Courtesy of Bluemouth Inc.