

# Cultural phenomenon of the celebrity: hermeneutic analysis



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New ways of thinking can often illuminate new ideas that would not come to light using our conventional and most natural modes of reasoning. We can be stretched in dynamic ways by altering our methods or approaches to our thinking. Several methods of thinking include exploration of the unconscious, symbolic systems, radical Synthesis, hermeneutic analysis, among others. For me, the hermeneutic form of thinking has the most unsettling effect upon my mind. A hermeneutic approach has experienced a revival in recent times in the wake of influential thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others. These hold a significant place in the present intellectual climate in the Western world. For this essay, I decided to use a hermeneutic approach to analyze a particular cultural phenomenon. Cultural phenomena are of vital importance for study since they represent aspects of human nature (en masse) that are impossible to extrapolate independently. Not only are they interesting to study, but they maintain continual interest for elites and common people alike. It is not a stretch to state that these phenomena successfully capture the population's imagination. In this particular essay, I will look at the cultural phenomena of the celebrity using hermeneutic analysis. The hermeneutical way of thinking, in this case, won't apply to a given text but rather to the social phenomenon of "celebritydom". By thinking about social phenomena in a hermeneutical way, one can look at a subject that rarely gets such scrutiny and hopefully begin to find understanding as to why our societies are so enthralled by the celebrity narrative. The development of a new form of "celebritydom" can be understood in a new way by understanding the context, audience, media sources, and other hermeneutical factors. First of all, we will begin to think about the context of celebrities in the past.

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There has most obviously been a shift in Western Society in the development of the celebrity. It has not been an overnight shift by any means, but it has been significant. The most outstanding example of recent changes in the nature of celebrity is the professional celebrity—a celebrity with little reason to be revered or famous. The prime example would be the infamous Paris Hilton. Although a notable heiress to her parent's fortune, she has become a celebrity in her own right through self-promotion. There are countless heirs to various fortunes that will never be known. This kind of character, however, is unprecedented, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most celebrities came into being through some sort of accomplishment, i. e. film, music, politics, sports, etc. Or, they became celebrities by association, such as royalty. The amount of coverage allotted to celebrity-esque storylines has grown exponentially. Entire television channels are devoted to the ceaseless coverage of celebrity's lives. A whole subclass of photography has developed in the "paparazzi," known for being the epitome of the dog-eat-dog line of work. Not to mention the countless "tabloids" that line the newsstands. These are some of the basic contextual factors that surround the modern celebrity phenomenon.

Another factor for thinking about this social phenomenon is the audience. The audience for the development of new celebrities that must be analyzed if one is to use a hermeneutical strategy. The audience for much of celebrity press and concern has largely not changed in type, but likely has changes in how broad the appeal is. It would have been impossible to imagine that Clark Gable's personal life would have been known or a concern for Middle East youth fifty years ago. Today, however, in all corners of the world they not

only know the names of key celebrities but also their storylines of gossip. I remember being asked in a remote village in Albania about the future of “J-Lo” and Ben Affleck’s relationship if they got married. Obviously this change has a lot to do with the digital revolution—opening up a large part of the world to a previously unknown celebrity world. It also betrays the fact that the same phenomenon is at work in these non-Western countries as is here in the West.

Knowledge and a pursuit of information about Western celebrities could also reveal an admiration of the culture of celebrities by the non-West, but often times these elements remain even in countries predisposed to hate the west. Although many citizens of these said countries likely separate the politics and the culture of the West, a large majority still do not. There is an effect of “can’t help but look” type psychology in regards to coverage of celebrities. Just like in the West, many in these societies likely think the coverage is superfluous and or wrong. Although a judgment has been made concerning the validity and morality of celebrity coverage many remain to have a working knowledge of the ins and outs of Hollywood love life. These ‘stories’ seem to do something for us en masse.

Using further hermeneutical strategies, we will now turn to the sources for the coverage of celebrity gossip and the like. If one is to exit the supermarket on a given day he or she is given the opportunity to be swiftly educated in celebritydom. The print media is a key source of information on celebrities. This seems to be chiefly centered on magazines; the newspaper medium seems to inadequately address the goals of celebrity coverage. The magazine provides the opportunity for vivid pictures, small pithy

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commentary, and quick entertainment. It is glitzy, stylish, and most of all fast. Whereas one may need to have some background in Middle Eastern politics in order to find parts of the newspaper engaging, the celebrity magazine can bring the glamour and scandal of the celebrity phenomenon with little or no education. The celebrity magazine is an odd mix of “posed” shots of red carpet entries into various galas, possibly a celebrity interview/photo shoot, and scandalizing pictures kindly provided by the paparazzi. This seems to be a winning combination of glamour, personal interest, and scandal.

The second main conduit for the celebrity phenomenon is the television medium. As mentioned before, “E!” is an entire channel devoted to the coverage of celebrity life. This is not to mention the countless celebrity news shows, and their subsequent spoofs. Celebrity news shows use a similar format compared to that of their magazine cousins. The show usually features some sort of personal interaction with a celebrity, praising the glamour or character of a particular celebrity, and (of course) the mandatory scandal. These shows have produced celebrities in their own right out of the mere reporting on celebrities. The prime example is Ryan Seacrest. Seacrest is the epitome of the ultimate host, having hosted the top twenty for years on a radio station in Los Angeles, been an E! “anchor,” and most famously the host of American Idol. Seacrest has become a celebrity by merely reporting on celebrities. Both media types—that of magazine and t. v.—have worked in conjunction. One reports on the other and vice versa. One makes the other.

Using a hermeneutical strategy to look at the social phenomenon of the celebrity has brought to light several profound new ideas for me. The first is what celebrity coverage *does* for us. I have come to the conclusion at various times that humans have at all times needed a common narrative in their social relationships. In days gone by, this narrative could be sustained by regional parochial concerns. A village would find a bond in the fact that their story was shared, they lived close to one another, married into each other's families, etc. The gossip and glory of a small town would sustain its people. Yet, as society has diversified, fragmented, pluralized, etc. it has lost that local connection that is vital for human connection. At the most basic social level, we need something to talk about—a common ground. Human connection is essential for the flourishing of human life. Celebrity coverage, professional sports, and other modern social phenomena seek to fill that void. In a time when we increasingly find our human contact in less connected or natural ways, such coverage give us a cultural common ground. We can gripe about the fortunes of Liverpool or quip about the Beckham family to absolute strangers and they will likely be able to track with our line of thought. Celebrity narratives give us a common ground for humor, social reflection, and allusions. In order to have fulfilling communication we must have some sort of shared story, even if these stories are plastic in nature. Our society has inevitably become more diverse, global, and connected. This has inevitably lead to an erosion of parochial concerns, and pushed us to socially evolve in order to maintain human connection. We have found common social narrative in the celebrity. Their story has become a common story for us. Their divorces, their cheating, their success, their money, etc., have all become a commentary about our own

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lives. This line of thought leads me to an additional hermeneutic conclusion concerning celebrity coverage and its reflective nature.

We are not interested in celebrities just because they happen to be successful but because they are reflective. Celebrities embody our hopes and dreams, fears and pitfalls, and desire for detachedness. The populace not only celebrates celebrity success, but also celebrates celebrity failure. There is a lust for failure as much as there is for success in the interest in these lives. It is interesting to note that the *most* famous celebrities are those where there are equal portions success and failure. This is important. Without adjoining failure these celebrities fail to capture people's imagination. Too much success and too much failure both trigger a loss of interest in the given celebrity. Celebrities find themselves in a proverbial catch-22, trying to allow promotion while not being raked through the coals. The most successful in this respect have allowed both. The reality about celebrity coverage is that we are not interested because these people are necessarily glamorous (there are a lot of unknown glamorous people to be found). We are interested because celebrities create for us a narrative for self reflection and self understanding.

Having used hermeneutical techniques such as analyzing the context, audience, media sources, etc., I have come to some interesting new ideas and understanding about a key phenomenon in our society—the celebrity. In previous times, I have been rather perplexed as to why we care so much about these lives. Yet after thinking about the topic using hermeneutical analysis, I have come to several profound reasons as to why this is so.