

050:489, The Senior Seminar  
Spring, 2006

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## The American Cult of Celebrity

picture(also, page 2 is a picture)

### Who are these people and why would any sane person care about them?

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"If you wish to live long, don't become famous"  
[Israel Ba'al Shem Tov, rabbi, 1700-1760]

"In the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes"  
[Andy Warhol]

"The celebrity is a person who is well known for his well-knownness"  
[Daniel Boorstin]

"We're [the Beatles] bigger than Jesus"  
[John Lennon]

"I too wish I could be Cary Grant"  
[Cary Grant]

"Our age, when the finest flower of mankind devote their lives to the great god Publicity"  
[John Fowles, in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*]

"I often refer to my life before the White House as when I was a real person."  
[Hilary Clinton at time her husband was president]

"What are you famous for?" "For nothing. I am just famous."  
[Irish Murdoch, *The Flight From the Enchanter*]

"Politics is show business for ugly people"  
[U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel]

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## THE CULT OF CELEBRITY: AMERICA AS A CELEBRITY CULTURE

Materials for this course fall into three categories. Items listed for a particular date must be read or viewed by that date except for the occasional film in class. There are seven required books. These are available at the Douglass bookstore. I tried to keep the price of books as low as possible. Even so, I do wish the course cost less in terms of materials. Here are the books:

### Required Books

Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: Pseudo Events in America*  
Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*  
Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*  
Nathaniel West, *Day of the Locust*  
Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls*  
Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*  
Neal Gabler, *Life, The Movie*

### Electronic Reserve

The second category of materials is an electronic packet of articles from magazines, newspapers, and journals, as well as chapters from books. To access these readings, go on the web, find Rutgers, then Rutgers libraries, then Reserves and then enter my name, "Rockland" and go to our course (050:489). I suggest you immediately print out the whole packet. We will discuss most of these works in class and I would like you to always have in class the materials for a particular week. The only cost for you to print out the packet is the price of about 190 pieces of paper, perhaps a couple of bucks. The last time I taught this course, before electronic reserve, the cost of the packet that year was \$60 because of all the literary permissions involved. Electronic reserve does not require permissions, which is a blessing. Please note that the electronic packet is numbered. Disregard the page numbers of the articles or chapters themselves. I also include, at the end of this syllabus, a copy of the Table of Contents of the electronic packet for your ready reference, though it also appears as p. 1 of the electronic packet.

### Films

We will see a fair number of films as part of the course, a couple in class but the great majority will be on reserve in the Music/Media department of the Douglass Library. Films on reserve are listed in the syllabus with a double asterisk. Some of them are my own films and are kept in a different place in media under the category PV (Professor's Video). I will indicate in the syllabus all films that are PV films. If you are told in the

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Media Department that they do not have a particular film it is probably because of the inexperience of the student working there. Insist that film are there (they are!) and, where appropriate, say that this is a "PV" film. You may view films at the library or, should you prefer, you can rent many of them at a video store and see them at your leisure. Here are the hours of the Douglass Media Center:

Monday thru Thursday	8 a.m.-10 p.m
Friday	8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Saturday	10 a.m.-6 p.m.
Sunday	12 noon-11 p.m. (Total 88 hours per week)

Films will be on reserve for two weeks prior to their discussion date in class and will be removed from reserve on that day.

### **Attendance**

A seminar is a participatory experience. Therefore, unlike other classes where attendance may not be taken, in this course attendance is *expected* and *required* at every session. You may not miss any session of the seminar without prior permission or your grade will be negatively affected. If you know there is a session of the seminar you must miss, please inform me at once. If you are seriously ill, be sure to either e-mail me or phone me and, at the very least, leave me a message no later than fifteen minutes prior to the beginning of a seminar (932-9179 or rockland@rci.rutgers.edu). If I do not hear from you prior to a meeting of the seminar and you are absent, that will be considered an absence whatever the circumstances.

**Tardiness** will not be tolerated. Several tardies will equal an absence and will affect your final grade. The first thing we will do at each seminar meeting is read the short papers written for that week. If you arrive late, you will not have the opportunity to read the papers which will be the basis of that week's discussion. Worse, if you have written for that week and arrive late no one will be able to read your paper in advance of the seminar. Students who arrive late totally interrupt the flow of the seminar and inconvenience everyone else.

### **Class Participation**

It goes without saying that class participation is a very important part of the work in a seminar and will form a corresponding part of your grade in the course. Also, please believe me when I say that, because of the intimacy of a seminar environment, in which we do our work together, I will *know* when and if you are ill-prepared.

### **Short Papers**

There are no exams in this seminar. That's the good news. My philosophy is that seminars are for adults. I don't want to test you; I want you to be totally involved because you want to be. To help keep that involvement on a high level, I am requiring five short papers and

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a term paper. That's the "less good news." The five short papers may not be longer than two pages each and one page will be adequate. No cover sheets, please. Papers are to be written primarily in response to the readings and films for a particular week. They may also bring into discussion materials from previous weeks, as well as ideas previously discussed in the seminar. Feel free, as well, to mention particular views expressed by seminar members (including me) should you wish to support such views or take issue with them. I'd like these papers to have punch and not to shy away from controversy. Think of them as "newspaper editorials." Argue for your point of view.

Papers may be written in an informal style. Footnotes will generally not be necessary (though you should indicate the page from which you are quoting or paraphrasing, but you should footnote any sources not among the seminar materials). Generally, you should focus on the texts, written or filmic, instead of going off on some wild tangent. Each essay must have a title (provocative when possible) suggesting your thesis or point of view. When you are writing these papers you should ask yourself: "Can I, in one sentence, say what my thesis is, and does my title suggest what it is. If not, you probably don't know what you want to say, and, if you don't, you are unlikely to say anything worthwhile.

Short papers are due by 5 p.m. on Mondays. I will read them Tuesdays as I prepare for the next day's seminar and return them to you, graded, at the conclusion of the seminar on Wednesdays. If you cannot finish one of your five short papers and hand it in by 5 p.m. on a Monday, simply don't write for that week. You can, of course, always hand in papers early.

One copy of your paper should be placed in the envelope outside the American Studies office on the bulletin board on Mondays by 5 p.m. Bring three other copies of your paper to the seminar on Wednesdays and distribute them to your classmates not one minute past the start time of the seminar.

My grading system will be (very good to excellent), (good), and (unsatisfactory). I may occasionally award a (meaning "super") or a (meaning "awful"). Hopefully none, or not too many, of the latter.

I know from experience that some students tend to put off writing these short papers until late in the course. Then they find themselves caught short. Bad idea putting off writing these papers, maybe even a fatal one. I'd suggest you schedule your papers throughout the course now and not leave them to the end. For one thing, there's a good chance something will happen to preclude your getting the five papers done within the fourteen weeks and then you'll be in serious trouble. For another, you should be devoted exclusively to working on your term paper in the latter weeks of the seminar and, if you are writing it while still writing short papers, you may do poorly on both. I wish to stress that no excuse for not getting the five papers done during the course will be acceptable. I realize that some of the language in this syllabus may sound draconian. So be it. I consider it part of my responsibility to train my students to do not only excellent work but

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to do it on time. The "real world" expects work on time. I want you to succeed in your chosen careers, so I will do everything in my power to train you to do so. Some of you are used to doing everything late, and some professors encourage your already flakey behavior by accepting late work without serious penalties. I do not.

### **Term Papers**

In addition to the five short papers, you will be responsible for a term paper of 10-15 pages. Only one copy, just for me. Papers will be due at the next to the last meeting of the seminar on April 19. Term papers are to be handed in in class, not placed in the envelope. Late papers will, of course, be penalized. Further, I am leaving for a lecture trip to South America the moment classes end so if you are late with your term paper I may be forced to give you an incomplete which, for some, might preclude you from graduating.

Although I am open to other ideas, I will, in general, be expecting you to pick a figure in American popular culture and to analyze the devices and means by which their celebrity status has been or is being constructed. (It is possible that I would accept a film instead of a paper. If interested in doing a film, speak to me.)

While obviously providing the basic biography of the figure you select, you must go beyond biography to determine how their celebrity status has been manufactured. In general, I would suggest you *not* write about someone whose fan you are. It is unlikely you can be objective about such a figure and, thus, your term paper would be overly enthusiastic and probably poor. Remember: "fan" is short for "fanatic." You can admire the figure you select but if, on analyzing your feelings, you realize that you adore or have worshipful feelings towards them, find someone else to write about.

Figures that come to my mind immediately as potential subjects for this project are James Dean, Elvis Presley, Tiger Woods, Britney Spears, Derek Jeter, Frank Sinatra, Michael Jordan, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Marlon Brando, Eminem Charles Lindbergh, 50 Cent, John Kennedy, Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Martin Luther King, Muhammed Ali, Norman Mailer, Chris Rock, the American Idol winners, Margaret Mead, Condaleeza Rice, Hilary Clinton, Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Paul Robeson, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush. These names are only meant to be suggestive. There are hundreds more that would be appropriate. In general I would like you to examine a figure whose appeal or charisma has radically enhanced their particular talents (such as they may be), people whose celebrity status was created not only by handlers and managers and spin doctors but, perhaps, *by the needs of the American people*.

To make sure this is a **term paper** (that you are thinking about it and working on it throughout most of the semester) and, also, that you have picked a viable topic and that your emphasis is likely to be productive, I want you to hand in a one page typed precis (original and copy stapled together) in which you discuss the figure you have chosen and,

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even on a preliminary basis, offer some ideas that might explain why this person has been so extraordinarily celebrated (again, ideas that go far beyond his/her particular talents). I will slip a piece of carbon paper between the original and copy and respond in writing to your choice by the next meeting of the seminar. Your term paper preces are due at the 6th meeting of the seminar, that is, on February 22. Bring them to the seminar rather than placing them in the short papers envelope.

## SYLLABUS

Session I, January 18

### INTRODUCTION

film: Jerry Springer's *Too Hot For TV* [in class]

readings: "Dying for the Age of Diana," *Newsweek*, by Jonathan Alter; "At Diana's Shrine," by Sarah Lyall, *New York Times*, July 3, 1998; "Princess Di, Mother T, and Me," by Christopher Hitchens, *Vanity Fair*, December, 1997; *Diana Regina*, by Camille Paglia, from *Vamps and Tramps*, 1994; "Jerry Springer's Voice Mail," by Bill Sheft (date unknown); "Talking Trash," by James Collins, *Time*, March 30, 1998; "#\$%&@Jerry Springer," by Barbara Lippert, *New York*, April 20, 1998.

Session II, January 25

### FAME AND NARCISISM

film: *David Holzman's Diary* [in class]

read: "America's Addiction With Celebrity Status," by Fred Bruning, *MacLean's*, Dec. 4, 1995; "Now Playing, Real Life [or should we say 'Reel Life'] the Movie," by Neal Gabler, *American Culture and the Media*, 1997; "Do Not Adjust Your Set," by Chris Smith, *New York*, June 1, 1998; "Celebrity Conquers America," by Richard Brookhiser, from *American Heritage*; "Media and Culture in the Winner-Take-All Society," by Robert Frank and Philip Cook, from *The Winner Take All Society*; Excerpts from *The Culture of Narcisism*, by Christopher Lasch, 1979; Excerpt from *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture* by Stuart Ewen, 1988; Excerpts from *Fool's Names, Fool's Faces*, by Andrew Ferguson ("A People Person," "My Night With Gennifer," and "Saying It With Flowers"); Introduction to *The Frenzy of Renown*, by Leo Braudy, 1986

Session III, February 1 NEWS VERSUS PSEUDO EVENTS: WHEN DID AMERICANS BEGIN TO WAG THE DOG?

read: Daniel Boorstin, *The Image*

film: *Wag the Dog* [\*\* PV:reminder this means on reserve and is a Professor's Video]

Session IV, Feb. 8 WAS HITLER A CELEBRITY, IS MADONNA A FASCIST?

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films: Madonna, *Truth or Dare?* [\*\*PV]

Leni Riefenstahl, director *Triumph of the Will* [\*\*]

read: *Time* story on Hitler by Elie Wiesel, April 13, 1998; "The Politics of Performance," from *The Frenzy of Renown*, by Leo Braudy, 1986; excerpt from *Madonna Unauthorized*, by Christopher Anderson. 1991; "Madonna in the Shadows" and "Madonna as Gaugin," by Camille Paglia, from *Vamps and Tramps*, 1994; "Madonna and Child," by Ingrid Sischy, *Vanity Fair*, March 1998.

Session V, Feb.15      WHAT DOES CELEBRITY DO TO AMERICA EXACTLY?

read: Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*

Session VI, Feb. 22      HEROES, CELEBRITIES OR KNAVES?

films: "Lindbergh" [\*\*]

"Patton" [\*\*]

read: Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message"; "Above It All: Lindbergh and Hemingway," from *The Frenzy of Renown*, by Leo Braudy, 1986; "Net Worth," by Henry Louis Gates, *The New Yorker*; "Citizen Kreimer," by Michael Aaron Rockland, *New Jersey Monthly*, December, 1992.

**reminder: term paper precis due this day**

Session VII, March 1    WHOSE DISEASE IS IT, CELEBRITIES OR FANS?

film: *The Fan* [\*\*PV]

read: Nathaniel West, *Day of the Locust*

film in class: *The Beatles 1964 Tour of America*

Session VIII, March 8    ARTISTS, CELEBRITIES AND CON ARTISTS

films: *Andy Warhol* [\*\*] *Andy Warhol Superstar* [\*\*]; *The Life and*

*Times of Allen Ginsberg* [\*\*] and *Mad City* [\*\*PV]

read: "The Girl of the Year," by Tom Wolfe," from *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, 1965; "The Truman Show"[ note: not the movie, that's for April 5] by James Wolcott, *Vanity Fair*, December, 1965; "Scholars and Survivors Tatter Kerouac's Self-Portrait," by Dinitia Smith, *New York Times*, July 9, 1998

Session IX, March 22    THE PRIZE/PRICE OF CELEBRITY

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read: Jacqueline Susann, *Valley of the Dolls*; also excerpt from *Toxic Fame*, by Joey Berlin

Session X, March 29      THE PRIZE/PRICE OF CELEBRITY II

films: *Quiz Show* [\*\*] and *Celebrity* [\*\*PV]

read: "Homes Movie," by Michael Aaron Rockland, *New Jersey Monthly*, September, 1988.

Session XI, April 5      IS T.V. JUST MAKING US DUMBER OR IS IT FATAL?

film, *The Truman Show* [\*\*PV]

read: Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

Session XII, April 12      PUBLIC LIFE/SHOW BUSINESS AS DISEASE

films: *The Rose* [\*\*] *Nashville* [\*\*] *Citizen Kane* [\*\*]

Session XIII, April 19      MANUFACTURING FAME:FAME AS A COMMODITY

read: Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame*

**note: term projects due in class this day.**

Session XIV, April 26      FAME VS. CELEBRITY

film: *EdTV* [\*\*PV]

read: Neal Gabler, *Life, The Movie*

