

Defiling Celebrity

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This Is Me, With Rolf

I saw Rolf Harris in our street the other day. I was just parking the car and there he was, walking along the road. He came right by me, and then turned into the little park opposite our house. I didn't say anything and, funnily enough, he didn't say anything to me either, though I sensed he was on the point of it. This is not an entirely unprecedented experience in our street. The lead singer of Jamiroquai lived for a while a few doors down, and I gather he sold his house on to the lead singer of Travis, who then caused flutters in the parish by persuading his band to do unscheduled performances at the infant school where his son went. Still, this is a pretty ordinary Victorian terrace in Crouch End, not Highgate, (where I once saw Ruby Wax having breakfast), Hampstead or even Hackney, and this kind of encounter is not at all the sort of thing you have to learn to be blasé about. In truth, I don't really know what the lead singer of Travis looks like, even though, thinking back, there is a good chance that it was him I lent my hedge-trimmer to over the summer. Whereas you could not possibly make a mistake about seeing Rolf Harris. This was a definitive event, a conjunction of worlds.

Richard Schickel points out two interlocking fantasies of the life of the celebrity. The first is the 'dream of autonomy': the celebrity lives a life unrestricted by necessity. The second is 'a dream of intimate, almost familiar connection' (Schickel 2000, 255), or what we might call the Valhalla fantasy: that to be a celebrity is to sport and feast in continuous fellowship with other, equally celestial entities. Whereas Rolf Harris was alone. He was just walking along the road, on his own. I found this fact perplexing and unnerving. Surely somebody like Rolf Harris must always be accompanied by some kind of retinue – minders, makeup artists, agents? My first thought was to take a panicky look round: seeing Rolf Harris, whom I have never seen except when he was being watched, by me, made me certain that he must be being filmed, which meant that I too might be in shot. This was altogether an ointment to which I was unwilling to supply the fly. I sat in my car and fiddled with my keys until he had gone by, but could see no camera crew anywhere. Then I watched him for a bit from behind, just carrying on walking. My seeing him from the back made me feel obscurely guilty, it seemed a kind of liberty or violation. The backs of celebrities are not

generally available for scrutiny and thus rather vulnerable. Vulnerable to whom, or what? (To me?)

So put out was I at this astonishing behaviour of the part of Rolf Harris, walking along the road, my road, on his own, that I now realise I assumed he must be having some kind of breakdown. This impression was firmed up when he turned off the road and into the little park just across from my house. Evidently, he was going for one of the many unoccupied benches, which are often favoured by crooning derelicts or the sort of characters evoked in Philip Larkin's 'Toads Revisited' – 'the men/You meet of an afternoon:/Palsied old step-takers,/Hare-eyed clerks with the jitters,/Waxed-fleshed out-patients/Still vague from accidents' (Larkin 1971, 18). I could easily imagine him a bit later on, being tenderly led away by the loyal P.A. who had been searching for him all day, sobbing a little, trousers soaked in wee, still clutching his noggin of rum in a paper bag.

Part of my astonishment came from the fact that something in me had imagined that Rolf Harris was dead, like Margaret Thatcher or Jimmy Saville. He certainly looked impossibly old, as celebrities seen in the waning flesh always, always are. Why did this upset me? I remembered the story that Melanie Klein tells of a young child who is being held up to the window by his grandmother, when, suddenly looking round to see the face of an elderly stranger who has entered the room, he is plunged into anxiety - because, says Klein, his 'bad (grand)mother' has suddenly appeared in the place of the 'good (grand)mother' (Klein 1997, 103). Bad Rolf (vengeful, vulpine, his very name a hoarse, convulsive bark) had somehow insinuated himself in the place of avuncular, animal-loving Rolf, and what big eyes he had. What was Bad Rolf doing here? (*On his own?*) Did I know where my children were? (Did he?)

Now, Freud suggests that there is a straightforward reason for our fear of the revenant, reverend dead. It is because we think they will have found out posthumously about our homicidal intentions towards them in life. that we wanted them dead. We may even ourselves feel that their conveniently dropping dead like that, just when we had wanted them to, was no coincidence. We may suspect we seen them off through our secret ill-will, and that they have returned to get their own back (Freud 1990, 116-17) The menace of the bad mother comes from a similar fear of the recoil upon the child of the murderous fantasies she has entertained towards the figure she has violently segregated from that of the good mother.

Freud and Klein doubtless hope to reassure us that these are fantasies, which, once confronted and armed against, will seem as unreasonable as they are. But the thing is, it would not be at all unreasonable for the undead

Rolf Harris to be out to get me, dead or alive. For the dossier of my dealings with Rolf Harris does not make edifying reading. While never having had anything against him personally, I can't remember ever having thought about or referred to Rolf as anything else but an idiot, loser, or affable kind of goon. Like all the schoolboys of my generation (you see how old he must actually be?), I could always summon a passable Rolf Harris accent when I needed a character to guy. I was an energetic purveyor of all the many Rolf Harris jokes in circulation, and in search of cheap laughs there was a Rolf Harris character in a revue we put on at university (oddly enough, in my overheated reminiscence, the character was played by the young Tony Blair, no doubt material for rich and extended analysis, for which I have neither time nor stomach here). Seeing Rolf Harris walking along our road like that made me realise that I was afraid he must know about all the casual derision and lampooning to which I, like everybody else, had subjected him all my life, and most of his. But why should he pick on me? Everybody did it. That was what Rolf Harris meant, what he was. He encouraged it, he went along with the joke, like all good victims of bullying, he was able to laugh at himself, good old Rolf, turning up every year to wobble out 'Tie Me Kangaroo Down Sport' to the mock-affectionate roars of the Glastonbury crowd.

But he certainly didn't seem to be in a laughing mood as he walked along our street. On inspection, he seemed to have a rather dragging gait, which increased his air of unstable menace. While I am spilling the beans about my career of casual thoughtcrime, I may as well tell you of the most humiliating episode of Rolf-baiting of all. I once actually wrote a fan letter to Kate Bush about her superlative album *The Dreaming*, in which I swottily lectured her on my appreciation of the playing off of different musical styles and registers in the album. I congratulated her in particular for the way she had sent up Rolf Harris in the title track, which, as you will perhaps recall, features Rolf playing the didgeridoo, with Kate manufacturing a just-passable Harrisian Strine in the vocals, which are all about kangaroos and aboriginals being run over. Shortly afterwards, I read an interview in which she spoke of what a privilege it had been to work with someone who understood the nature and possibilities of indigenous music so well, and how underestimated his musicianship was. I felt it as a direct reproof. Oh my god: I had put my address in the letter! Clearly I had something to expiate.

Celebrity Power

After these revelations of my complex psychological entanglement with the figure of Rolf Harris, it will be no surprise that I will be speaking about the ambivalence of our relations to celebrity. I'm going to be saying that the contemporary culture of celebrity is intricately and intrinsically threaded

through with envy, hostility, fear and rage. Writers about celebrity regularly affect surprise and mystification when confronting the evidence of this kind of negative feeling. How can adoration, admiration and adulation coexist with the desire to do such dirt on their subjects? Graeme Turner notes that ‘the pleasures of certain kinds of celebrity material are derived from their capacity to be invasive, exploitative and vengeful’ (Turner 2004, 122), but he finds such practices anomalous and ‘difficult to interpret from the outside’. Indeed, he clearly regards them as a kind of perverse modification of mainstream celebrity ‘consumption’: ‘the practices I examine here take us beyond the specific contents of production within which I have situated celebrity in this book, emphasising the mobility of celebrity and its availability for appropriation into other domains of commodification and consumption’ (Turner 2004, 122).

David Marshall also notes in passing the fact that celebrities, unlike the famous, are subject to negative responses: ‘The sign of the celebrity is ridiculed and derided because it represents the center of false value...The celebrity sign effectively contains this tension between authenticity and false cultural value’ (Marshall 1997, xi). And yet, in the analysis of the power invested in the figure of the celebrity that follows this comment, this possibility of ridicule and derision dwindles to invisibility. Marshall even has a section on Freud’s theory of the primal horde which institutes law in its murder of the first father, but he ignores the ideas of murder and guilt in Freud’s quaintly fantastic myth, drawing from it instead only an achingly obvious point about ‘the process of identification and idealization that the celebrity embodies for the population’ (Marshall 1997, 25). Though Marshall recognises the process whereby celebrities are constructed and disseminated, he also insists on the power - principally the power to focus affect (Marshall 1997, 199) - possessed by the celebrity. Since the celebrity is the very opposite of the self-made man, one is surely entitled to wonder where this power might come from. Well, it’s from the ‘system of celebrity’ itself,

that is positioned as a means of comprehending and congealing the mass into recognizable and generally nonthreatening forms. Simultaneous to the emergence of the popular will and democratic constructions in government was the building of means and methods of understanding and controlling the expression of the popular will. The system of celebrity is one of the ways in which the crowd/mass is housed/categorized and understood. (Marshall 1997, 203-4),

So, for Marshall, power is always exercised upon the mass. He acknowledges the possibility of ‘the threat... in the play with affect’ (Marshall 1997, 207), the fact that undesired responses to a public figure can bubble up and quickly propagate, but only in order to emphasise how carefully responses

are engineered in order to contain this threat (Marshall 1997, 207). The point is always to show how the unruly stew of public feelings is channelled, ordered and domesticated into what he calls ‘public subjectivity’ (Marshall 1997, 241-7). So nowhere in the chapter that is promisingly-entitled ‘The Embodiment of Affect in Political Culture’ is there any reference to any other affects than those held to be thus ‘positioned’, ‘constructed’, or otherwise constituted from above. The book concludes sonorously, but somehow also serenely, with the judgement that

Celebrities, as the affective economy’s construction of public individuals, are sites for the dispersal of power and meaning into the personal and therefore universal. They represent the reorganization of collective identities into the affective economy of the contemporary capitalist democracy. (Marshall 1997, 247)

This is odd, given where the book begins, which is in pointing out how flawed or dubious the meaning of celebrity is: ‘The air of inauthenticity that rings through these last examples describes the current meaning of celebrity. It has become a term that announces a vulgar sense of notoriety’ (Marshall 1997, 5). So how, one wonders, given this ambivalence, does the ‘system of celebrity’ come to exercise its power to render populations so docilely excitable?

Somewhat more positively, others emphasise the ways in which the celebrity acts as a vehicle or channel for feelings and beliefs displaced in commodity capitalism. Celebrities like Princess Diana are often said to generate, in the words of Graeme Turner, ‘para-social interactions that operate as a means of compensating for changes in the social construction of the communities within which many of us live’ (Turner, 23). In such accounts, celebrity constitutes a sad, but not entirely contemptible compensation for the alleged alienations and destructions of ‘community’ effected by modernity.

In all of this, one finds a systematic inattention to the systematically negative feelings and actions to which celebrities and the category of the celebrity are subject, which seems all the more systematic in that so many writers on the subject of celebrity first acknowledge and then ignore this dimension. I want to show in the remainder of this talk that celebrities and celebrity are not accidentally at risk from shaming, debasement, defilement, and ritual humiliation. I’d like it if we stopped not noticing how inseparable celebrity is from such feelings, and from the forms of violence from which they arise or which they can provoke.

The Dream Scheme of Celebrity

It is not hard to see that the culture of celebrity involves profound and complex states of subjective feeling and fantasy. To understand the workings of celebrity it is necessary to grasp what Richard Schickel calls ‘the larger dream scheme that has evolved out of this century’s countless billions of fantastical encounters between the celebrity elite and the anonymous mass’ (Schickel 2000, 255). The encounters are not always comfortable or straightforward. Let us first of all consider some of the work done by the word *celebrity* itself. Celebrity is different from both fame and renown. Both of these latter categories suggest a kind of achieved or objective position. Celebrity, by contrast involves prestige or charisma, both of which depend upon a participation or circulation of affects. It doesn’t matter whether or not I think Charles Dickens or Che Guevara or Saddam Hussein are famous, they just are and that is that. If I have never heard of them, so much the worse for me. But for me to acknowledge a public figure as a celebrity is to assent to the fact that they are the object of celebration. The celebrity is not just well-known, they are in-celebration, to-be-celebrated. To have fame means to be famous, the noun and the adjective closing together like the pages of a book. Fame is fate: celebrity is being fêted. To be a celebrity is to stand in present need of celebration.

Because the celebrity is in need of celebration, the celebrity makes an implicit claim upon us. One is thereby doubly subjected. On the one hand, celebrities have power over us, in all the obvious ways; they are rich, privileged, admired, desired, made much of, free. But they also have the power that comes from the solicitation of our admiration of these qualities, the call they make to us to assent to their celebrity. Hence one aspect of the ambivalence of celebrities, namely our resentment of their presumption in soliciting acknowledgement of their celebrity. Fame makes no such demands on us: but we may well resent the expense of spirit that is entailed by this work of active assenting to celebrity. This is one of the reasons that insecurity and transience are built into the notion of celebrity. It may also help account for the scornfulness that attaches to the lower ranks of celebrity’s angelic throng – the Z-list or scum-of-the-earth celebrities who populate the reality shows. You cannot be slightly famous in this way. But because the condition of celebrity always involves presumption or demand, we feel entitled to deride those who claim to be celebrities without our ever having heard of them, even though the oxymoronic category of Unknown Celebrity is swelling all the time.

Celebrity culture mediates the mass and the individual, embodying one of many solutions to the distinctly modern problem of how to bring together the distant and the intimate. Celebrity culture is among the most striking forms of the condition of extimacy, or the intense exteriorisation of

intimacy, which media society effects. Is there violence in the vicinity of this intimacy? There certainly seems to be violation, the possibility that the closeness and familiarity of celebrities might become frightening and oppressive. Starstruck fans often feel that the celebrity is wholly theirs, their voice, their gaze fixed uniquely on them. But this narcissism can tip over into the sense of invasion. The stalkers and persecutors of celebrities often report their conviction that their targets are persecuting or even stalking them, looking out of the screen into their souls, embedding secret messages in their lyrics, walking around on their own outside their houses, and so on.

The celebrity is the also bearer of the power that, since the late nineteenth-century, has been generated in abundance by the apparatus of mass communication, namely the power of fascination. This is not simply the power to mesmerise, captivate or enchant. This is to say that the power does not simply flow (as in popular fantasies of ‘influence’) unidirectionally from the fascinator to his or her subjects. In fact, the dream scheme of celebrity involves complicated circulations of powers, in which agency and passivity undergo strange reversals and convolutions. The fascinator’s power is the power to awaken in the subject of enchantment the desire to be subjected to power. Where, though, does this power come from? It is not itself self-sufficient or self-originating, but comes from an acquiescence on the part of the celebrity - actor, sportsman, singer, politician - to the demands of the celebrity condition: an acquiescence, that is, to the demand that the celebrity assume the power to induce the powerful, insatiable, infinitely demanding surrender of conscious will characteristic of the fan or the celebrity watcher. Hence all the strange paradoxes of the celebrity dream scheme: the impassioned, intractable, domineering passivity of the celebrant, the helpless, involuntary imperium of the celebrity; the determination of the star not to surrender their ordinariness, and the audience’s refusal to permit the celebrity to give away their precious privilege, of being uniquely, passively exposed to ordeal, extremity and ruin.

Some of these affective knots do occasionally appear in writing about celebrity. Graeme Turner points to the occasional flarings among fans of the desire for revenge, arising from ‘a class-based sense of exclusion, a response to privilege’ (Turner 2004, 125). Virginia L. Blum’s recent book *Flesh Wounds* focuses in rather more detail on the dynamics of envy, disappointment and rage that are enacted through the very public open secret of cosmetic surgery. She describes a number of websites which offer visitors the chance to inflict digital damage on the faces or persons of celebrities. Often, as in the case of the *Smack Pamela Anderson* site, the target is a celebrity who has already obligingly subjected themselves to improving self-harm via the surgeon’s scalpel. (Blum 2003, 224-6). As Blum shows, cosmetic surgery seems to represent a particular provocation to viewers to magnify and

intensify the celebrity's self-injury. The obvious example here is Michael Jackson, who is held to be subject to a mysterious inner compulsion to deface his own visage and person and is also subject to caricaturing excoriation of his foolishness and self-destructive narcissism in doing so. If he had not himself so obligingly and ruinously rearranged his physiognomy, it seems there would have been plenty who would have done it for him. Blum analyses these phenomena as the expression of an unresolved relation of identification with the celebrity, which alternates violently between rapturous merger with what is taken to be an image of self-sufficient completeness, and angry, disappointed envy at the realisation that full identification with such a condition is impossible. The result is 'a narcissistic hell of unresolved rivalry with ideal counterparts' (Blum 2003, 221).

Of course there are bound to be actual bearers of these feelings for whom this analysis may or may not be plausible. But I do not think that one can simply read the operations of what is a dynamic interpersonal system in terms of a matching intrapersonal dynamic. What is being described here does not belong to the realm of psychology, because nobody feels any of these things. These are not conditions of mind, but mobile dispositions of affective actions. Like the quasi-objects spoken of by Michel Serres in *The Parasite* (Serres 1982, 225), they are quasi-affects, which jump from person to person like a hot potato or an epidemic. The point at which it is possible to find these feelings captured or personified in a particular individual is the point at which the circulations and substitutions are temporarily arrested: the moment when the music stops and somebody gets to open the parcel, or is left without a chair. As soon as somebody securely knows what they or somebody else is feeling, the game is derailed or denatured.

In discussing the downfall, or 'status-stripping ceremonies' (Rojek 2001, 82) of stars and celebrities, Chris Rojek distinguishes between *auto-degradation* 'in which the primary exponent of status-stripping is the celebrity' and *exo-degradation*, in which 'external parties, usually situated in the mass media, are the architects of the status-stripping process' (Rojek 2001, 80). His descriptions of the collapses into anorexia, drug addiction and alcoholism of celebrities like George Best, Alex 'Hurricane' Higgins, Paula Yates and others give little indication as to how this discriminator is to be applied to the narratives in question. Perhaps the most obvious example of the indissoluble ambivalence of this process is the trope of the projective first-person, in the form of phrases like 'My Cocaine Hell', 'My Rape Ordeal', 'My Night of Shame'. Nobody has ever used these phrases *in propria persona*, just as nobody outside the world of newspapers ever nowadays utters a 'vow' or commits an act of 'slaying'. Here, where the *auto-* is so obviously the artefact of the *exo-* (though perhaps never completely or definitively so),

is the prototype of a more general displacement or, as we might call it, *disappropriation* of feeling.

Comic Strip

Celebrities exist to be exposed. This is true literally as well as metaphorically. It used to be the case that important persons and persons of renown were insulated by layers of outward show and ceremony which were unavailable to ordinary people. The story of ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes’ makes it clear how little it matters whether one is actually clothed or not. The well-known distinction between the nude and the naked rests on the same distribution of privilege. The nude is cloaked in his or her display. The naked is abjectly deprived of this protection. Interestingly, there is no word to correspond to ‘the nude’, which names a certain kind of subject. ‘The naked’ simply means someone with no clothes on, while the nude means someone who is, if only for the time being, not only an unclothed being, but also a *being unclothed*. ‘The nude is a form of dress’, as John Berger puts it. When the stripper in a skuzzy pub with no stage or curtains finishes her act and has to stoop to pick up her discarded fishnets and garterbelt, she moves from the condition of the nude to the naked.

It is said that one can always defeat feelings of social intimidation by imagining the judge, teacher, policeman, prime minister, etc, naked. But celebrities are of course skilled exponents of the art of bodily self-exposure. With the pansexualisation, the pornalisation even, of visual culture, celebrity and sexual display have come closer and closer together, to the point where it sometimes seems as though the nude photographic session has become a rite of passage for the celebrity, an examination which one must pass in order to get on to the fabled A-list. Celebrities thereby render themselves immune from the humiliation of being imagined in the nude. Unless, that is, their willed nudity, their fully self-possessed exposure, can be degraded in some way, thus restoring the celebrity to the condition of nakedness. Hence the rise of the celebrity nude. Ruth Barcan finds in the appetite for unauthorised naked images of stars - telephoto-lens sunbathing snaps, stolen sex videos, footage from injudicious early appearances in porn movies (‘I was young and needed the money’) - a mixture between ‘the endless and impossible quest for authenticity’ and a rather more dubious voyeurism, delivering ‘the thrill of the forbidden and the stolen’ (Barcan 2004, 245). Barcan is unusual in the seriousness with which she takes the question of celebrity nudity, perhaps because her real focus is on the contemporary meanings of nudity rather than celebrity. Writers on celebrity itself tend to be less attentive. Graeme Turner follows the links from celebrity sites to celebrity porn sites, noting how close they are, but still unaccountably holds to on a fundamental distinction between the realms of

glamour and sleaze: ‘the distance between regarding celebrities with wonder to regarding them as whores is surprisingly short, but the kinds of images available in the latter context are significantly different’, he unconvincingly reassures us (Turner 2004, 124).

In fact, the institution of the celebrity porn site is the most telling example of the inseparability of admiration and degradation. The ambivalent reaction of celebrities themselves to such material is telling. Celebrities may attempt to deny that images in circulation are really them, may acknowledge their veracity, but attempt to restrict their circulation, on the grounds that they have been obtained illegally or represent an infringement of privacy, or may attempt to appropriate the profit from images, claiming violation of copyright. As Barcan observes, a celebrity will often launch a lawsuit with one logic, and then lurch across to another. (Barcan 2004, 246-7). The growing ease with which images can be digitally modified and manufactured makes for a whole new cycle of offence without harm. Of course there is an appetite, indulged by magazines like *Now!*, for warts-and-all pictures of celebrities who have dieted themselves to cadavers, gone gratifyingly to fat, or just dared to go out for a pint of milk without makeup. But celebrity porn pictures defile celebrities by displaying them in their essential condition of not really having their own body. It is a kind of enforced digital surgery, which no doubt encourages the more corporeal bodily kind. Where defilement and degradation has traditionally stripped objects of their dignity by reducing them to their bodies, these images deny the celebrity a body in which to be naked; this is defilement through idealisation.

The Machine of Disgrace

It is often suggested that celebrity has moved into the place occupied by religious values – that the celebrity is the last embodiment of the *mana* or *charisma* that in pre-modern societies was invested in powerful leaders or religious figures. (Rojek 2001, 57-8). Once again, this tends to be taken as an indication of the positive power of the celebrity or the idea of the celebrity. But the fact that the celebrity seems to be a kind of democratic demigod, the inheritor in a secular age of religious powers and functions, may offer a clue to some of the ambivalence attaching to the celebrity. For, as has often been noted, the sacred figure is often set apart not only in order to be adored or revered, but also to be the target of purgative or propitiatory violence. René Girard observes that the scapegoat is nearly always one who does not properly belong to a society, because of religious, ethnic or physical difference. We may nowadays be slow to recognise that this can be as true of a king or an aristocrat as it is of a beggar or leper. ‘A mere glance at world history’, writes Girard, ‘will show that the odds of a violent death at the hands of a frenzied crowd are statistically greater for the privileged than for any other category...Crowds commonly turn on those who originally held

exceptional power over them' (Girard 1986, 19). Girard coins the term 'marginal insider' to designate such vulnerable embodiments of privilege or power (Girard 1986, 18).

Girard was surely right to point out, in a much-reproduced interview for *Le Monde* on November 5, 2001, that what we call the clash of civilisations embodied in the war on terror is in reality an example of 'mimetic rivalry on a planetary scale' (Girard 2001), in which violence both produces and is itself produced by profound identifications. Not the least of these identifications is the coalition of religion and celebrity. The 9/11 attacks made Osama Bin Laden a celebrity, which is to say, allowed him to take the place of the negative, becoming a conduit for energies of disidentification and defilement that had previously been diffuse and unbound. Postcards and caricatures multiplied after 2001, showing Bin Laden raped by goats, gay Bin Laden, and so forth.

Because the Royal Family themselves embody the movement from religious or charismatic culture to secular culture, it is natural that its members should be made to suffer disproportionately from the demands of celebrity. Once the entry of Princess Diana into the Royal Family had introduced the virus of premier-league, no-holds-barred celebrity into the Palace, the role of its members was to be fattened up for various sacrificial acts of public roasting. Perhaps the present monarch's determination to outlive even Rolf Harris comes from her understandable abhorrence at the prospect of the role of Defender of the Faith passing to a man who sent telephone calls to his lover saying how much he would like to be reborn as her tampon. In reality, the declaration of a republic would throw the affective economy of the nation and the world into crisis, and would certainly require the completion of the process of celebritising the political head of state.

In his *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), Girard articulated the theory of violence that he has been elaborating in his work ever since. Girard's claim is that violence is related to the sacred, because the sacred means that which is most apt to be sacrificed. Sacrifice arises as an effort to contain what would otherwise be the endless cycle of violence which any violent act or rivalry can propagate. This is said to be a particular risk in premodern societies, which tend to have close-knit kinship structures, which in their turn mean that inaugurating acts of violence can easily prompt the desire for vengeance or reprisal. The very bonds of society become the engine for destroying it, in an unstoppable sequence of substitutions:

Vengeance...is an interminable, infinitely repetitive process. Every time it turns up in some part of the community, it threatens to [14-15] involve the whole social body. There is the risk that the act of

vengeance will initiate a chain reaction whose consequences will quickly prove fatal to any society of modest size. (Girard 1977, 14-15)

The reason that the victim of sacrifice tends to be socially marginal is to ensure that there will be no reprisals as a result of his or her death. Only in this way, according to Girard, can a violence to end violence be effected. The function of sacrificial ritual is therefore 'to "purify" violence; that is, to "trick" violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals' (Girard 1977, 36). Girard sees all religion as based upon the distinction between these different kinds of violence – profane, or contagious violence, and holy, once-and-for-all, unanswerable violence. Indeed, he suggests that it is the principal role of religion both to institute and obfuscate this distinction. Religion is therefore only

another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence. It is that enigmatic quality that pervades the judicial system when that system replaces sacrifice. This obscurity coincides with the transcendental effectiveness of a violence that is holy, legal, and legitimate successfully opposed to a violence that is unjust, illegal, and illegitimate (Girard 1977, 23)

Since the beginnings of celebrity culture, perhaps in the eighteenth century, there have been those who have sought celebrity through murder or violence. Richard Schickel says of this growing group that they 'require no metaphors whatever to apprehend the meaning of celebrity in today's world, who understand the demands of that role and, more important, the demands of winning it in open audition, with deadly directness' (Schickel 2000, 276). He goes on to characterise the view that 'murder is a hop, and a skip, a hoot and a holler, from "certification" by the media' as a kind of 'perverse celebrity' (Schickel 2000, 276), but points nevertheless to the close association between crime, especially crimes of violence, and celebrity. To be sure, these attempts to use violence to break through from obscurity to celebrity sometimes have celebrities as their objects: notable victims include John Lennon, Monica Seles, who was stabbed by an obsessed fan, George Harrison, also stabbed, by a fan who thought he was a witch, and the newscaster Jill Dando. The imagery of sacrifice surrounded the death of Princess Diana, and, indeed, tends to break out whenever a celebrity dies suddenly or violently.

Nevertheless, actual violence against celebrities is rarer than the presence of electric fences, security cameras and bodyguards might suggest, though celebrities are absolutely right to sense that they need protection from us. Much more routine and significant is the symbolic violence of defilement,

defacement and desecration. These all have one conspicuous advantage over homicide, namely that they leave the celebrity available for further symbolic assault. It is important that celebrities not only be disgraced and derided, but also that they continue to exist visibly in their humiliated condition: like a hanged man, the celebrity must be brought low on high. It is for this reason that celebrities do not cease to be celebrities after they have been defiled: indeed, one might say that they only really become celebrities once they have reached this point, and not just because they have been inoculated or hardened to their condition. It is the destiny and function of the celebrity to be exposed to scandal and absurdity and to bear its mark for ever. Celebrities are there not to be murdered, but rather to be *mortified*, indefinitely preserved in a condition of fate-worse-than-death. Hugh Grant's arrest for receiving oral sex from the prostitute Divine Brown, which cost him \$1225, of which only \$45 went in payment to Ms Brown for her services, meant that Grant had to act out for real his screen persona of the slightly dizzy, but fundamentally decent and ultimately self-deriding Englishman. As he publically confessed on the Larry King show "I could accept some of the things that people have explained, 'stress,' 'pressure,' 'loneliness' -- that that was the reason. But that would be false. In the end you have to come clean and say 'I did something dishonorable, shabby and goatish.'" (CNN Showbiz News 1995).

'There is good and bad in everyone', tootle Paul McCartney and Steve Wonder in their why-can't-we-just-get-along song 'Ebony and Ivory'. Melanie Klein also regards the toleration of ambivalence as the mark of psychological maturity, after the violent, pathological splittings of good from bad which characterise the 'paranoid-schizoid' phase of development. But not all ambivalence is desirable, nor is tolerance always a virtue. The defilement of celebrities, or, as I have been arguing here, the production of celebrity for the purpose of defilement, is an example, not of paranoid 'othering', but of an ambivalence that allows defilement to continue indefinitely. Even if their hurt is gratifyingly larger than life, celebrities, like toys or cartoon characters, cannot be hurt because it is well known that they don't exist. Besides which, they always deserve the ridicule they attract, because of the power we think that they think they have over us. Just occasionally, they may mistake the nature of the game and harm themselves; but what we really want is for them always to be there, at once adored and detested, our adoration the alibi for the vileness we require them to carry, and the defilement they must suffer the brake on our excessive adoration. 'Celebrity, in its modern form, exists as part of a long established pattern that attempts to position (and in so doing curtail) excess within the social order', warn Patrick and Kelli Fuery (Fuery and Fuery 2003, 37). But this kind of ambivalence is designed to incite and ensure excess, an infinite reproducibility of hostility, suffering and shame.

How does Girard's model fare in accounting for these actions and reactions? One of the obvious drawbacks in his model is its requirement of a separation between sacrificial and profane violence. Sacrificial violence is supposed to bring violence to an end, like the explosions that are the only way to put out a fire on an oil rig. But the defining feature of the symbolic sacrifice of celebrities is that there is never anything once-and-for-all about it. Instead, the purpose of this violence, or its symbolic form, defilement, is not to bring to an end but rather to *bring about* an infinite propagation of repetitions, reprisals and repercussions. Of course, the shame and suffering of particular celebrities will always be exhausted – in fact it is exhausted almost straight away - but another will always be found to take their place. Hence perhaps the huge multiplication in the number of alleged celebrities: to feed the disgrace machine.

Psychoanalytic readings assume a subject that is attempting to maximise pleasure, satisfaction, well-being, or success, seeing violence as a by-product of those drives. For such readings, violence is an anomaly to be explained. My suggestion is that we view violence as primary, not as an instinct, but as a structural effect. What matters is that opportunities for violence be maximised, and the forms of violence be maximally diversified. From this perspective, there is nothing mysterious about why celebrities should attract such venomous mockery and opprobrium, and be subjected to such systematic humiliation and disgrace. The category of the celebrity exists in order to allow the exercise of symbolic violence; it is an epiphenomenon of the game of violence. It is an impulse that is exactly the opposite of the sacred violence spoken of by Girard. Here, the purpose is not to stop the cycle of substitutive violence, but to secure it. The way to maximise possibilities of violence is to ensure that its object never dies, because they are never really there. The mysterious condition of the celebrity, which is to be both there and not there, the ideal of authentic being (which is always put to the test through suffering, above all else) and the proof that one's identity can be entirely manufactured, is explicable as affording opportunities for the infinite continuation of violence. Girard thought that the problem with real violence was that it was unstoppable. But, in our situation, the problem with real violence is that sooner or later, it must meet with impediments. The dream scheme of celebrity is produced in order to enable violence never to run out of reasons or opportunities. The best violence is the kind where you cannot be sure who has done it, whether it has happened, or who it has happened to.

Perhaps, however, what is really at work here is something more or other than violence: namely, an assault on the positivity of value itself. The celebrity is simultaneously highly-prized and utterly disposable, godly and

profane, regal and beggarly. I have been saying that defilement allows violence to continue, but perhaps there is also a sense in which violence is just an inferior form of defilement. There must be, not only a category, but also a practice of defilement, the capacity to withdraw value or see it diminish to nothing. The celebrity is not the shaman, the bearer of *mana*, or *charisma*, not, in other words, a figure in which real value is instinct or instilled. It is not absolute values that we lose when we dispense with the barbarities and infantilities of religion. It is *the necessity of the negative*. There are no negatives in nature or, as Freud astonishingly observed, in what he called the unconscious. Nature means the absence of negativity. Human values and the value of the human do not depend upon difference, as is commonly assumed. For nature is nothing but difference, as far as the eye can see. The human depends upon the specific difference of the negative, of the minus sign, the category of the barred, the unclean or the defiled. Most religious cosmogonies recognise this fact about themselves, for they date the beginning of things from the arising of a principle of division, in which negativity (evil, death, suffering, whatever ever it is that breaks into the realm of Edenic bliss or completeness of being) comes about. They thus recognise that without the specific difference exemplified by the category of the evil or the unclean, or the damned, or whatever name is assumed by this ‘*not-*’ or minus function, nothing intelligible, or at least intelligible to humans, can happen.

The so-called problem of evil is not a theological, but a logical problem: if there is evil, how can there be an omnipotent God?: if there is an omnipotent God, what is evil doing in the world? It is solved, not theoretically, but practically, by inversion. How can there be omnipotence – God, goodness, truth, life, freedom – without the negative? The problem begins with monotheism, of which global capitalism is in this sense an intensification. The more integrated and interdependent a society becomes – economically, culturally – and the more it therefore capitalises on its differences and surpluses, the less it can afford categories of the dispensable, and the less the luxury of sacrifice is available to it. Thus, the negative needs to become the unclean, which is to say the ambivalently evil. The Church Fathers developed the doctrine of permitted evil, according to which Satan had no real power, but acts only by permission of God. Similarly, a system that aims to be more inclusive than ever needs a mechanism for producing from within itself the negativity that previously could be thought to arise from or simply inhere in a state of nature. This negativity must now be produced by defilement, which in the process changes its grammatical function. Defilement was previously a danger, the danger of what might happen to us if we did not take measures to prevent it. Now, defilement is a positive action, the transitive action of defiling, that we give ourselves leave increasingly to perform. Defilement – disgracing, defacement, desecration –

is something we do to things rather than an effect produced upon us by the things that will defile us unless kept at a distance. There should be no surprise in the fact that celebrity culture has grown in proportion to the extension of protections to many of the other traditional scapegoat groups. Celebrity culture is a way of farming defilement, and conserving the possibility of destitution, undoing, and all the necessary realm of the not, under conditions of generalised positivity which otherwise threaten it with extinction.

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