

*Gresham Lecture, Wednesday 9 March 2011*

**The Making of Modern Celebrity**

Professor Christopher Cook

**INTRODUCTION**

Good evening and can I say how pleased I am that some of you seem to have returned to the Museum of London for the second of these lectures on the construction and consumption of celebrity. I feared that I might have driven you away for good after a comment following my first lecture that it was surely the first event supported by Gresham College in which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, those German high intellectuals had rubbed shoulders with Jordan, also known as Katie Price.

In my first lecture I contrasted two definitions of celebrity. Daniel Boorstin’s dictum that a celebrity is "a person who is known for his well-knownness.” And Andy Warhol’s observation that "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes”. I argued that Boorstin proceeds from a deep cultural pessimism and that Warhol hints a more accessible and indeed democratic version of celebrity.

I concluded by arguing that I found it difficult to subscribe to a post-structuralist approach to celebrity such as that developed by P.D.Marshall in which celebrities serve ‘to control the masses and to channel their emotional energies.’ *[P246 Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture, Minneapolis, MN, and University of Minnesota Press – 1997]*. But that on the other hand when Marshall writes that celebrities ‘act as representative embodiments for the rest of us of what it is like to be an individual.’ I find myself in agreement. That, I went on to say, is surely why Warhol rather than Boorstin is on the better side of the argument; celebrity can be a form of liberation which is why so many yearn to ‘be world-famous for 15 minutes.’

This evening I want to explore how celebrities embody our own sense of what it is like to be an individual, indeed how they enact our best hopes and worst fears. To put it simply how they appear to explain ourselves to us. But also how this is often a collective cultural experience, by which I mean, celebrities speak to all of us together as well as to the individual. In a former time that was perhaps what being a fan meant.

**IMAGE 1 – Beatles Fans at Heathrow in 1965**

When I look again at the black and white footage of the Beatles and their fans at Heathrow in 1965, and in particular at the banners I have a clear sense of how a collective response coexists with an individual response to the Fab Four. And how being a fan, ‘Fandom’ if you will permit me an ugly coinage, combines the private and the public, that listening to the music at home and then being at the airport as part of the crowd on the Terminal roof, in a kind of mirror image of our desire to know the private life of the public celebrity.

Feeling that you know someone who you could not possibly know is an essential part of the pleasure of celebrity. And when these friends reveal themselves as being no better than they should be then we are quick to condemn and indeed punish them. So this evening I also intend to explore what seem to me to be the dominant narratives that have attached themselves to the representation of celebrity. While also arguing that over last two decades popular television has fundamentally changed the way in which celebrity is both constructed and consumed. And latterly we shall be guided through these thoughts by two women.

**IMAGE 2 – Princess Diana and Jade Goody**

Princess Diana and Jade Goody, who for me exemplify how we consume celebrity and the often vexed relationship that exists between ourselves as consumers, the celebrity and the media. That triangle that I talked about in my first lecture.

**STARS AND CELEBRITIES**

A star is always a celebrity, but a celebrity need not be a star. This is how one of my students recently began an essay on celebrity magazines in the United Kingdom. It’s a neat formulation with a nice ring to it. Clearly Madonna is a star and also a celebrity. She has talent for one thing, as a musician and an actress. Paris Hilton on the other hand is clearly a celebrity but is there, say, talent on display in Paris Hilton’s British Best Friend? Well yes there is, even if you don’t care for it. As Bertolt Brecht observed, we go to the theatre to see skill at work. The same applies to television. And Hilton is skilful.

Within popular culture there is then a clear kinship between stars and celebrities even if they seem to belong to different constellations rather than coming from two distinct galaxies. This perhaps becomes clearer when we consider the classic star system operating within popular American cinema and at its zenith in the 1940s and 50s.

The cultural critic Fred Inglis grapples with the distinction between starts and celebrities when he writes “Stardom once offered *such* solace; its consolation and rapturous reassurance remain embedded in or faith in fame, even though so much has happened to us and to them since its cinematic peak in the 1950s. One way of grasping the history of celebrity since then is to see how admiration has become twisted by spite, gossip by vindictiveness, and how the careless envy which with teenagers once adored the Beatles turned into the purposeful malignance with which Princess Diana was pursued to her death.” [*A Short History of Celebrity* – Fred Inglis -Princeton University Press – 2010 ISBN 978-0-691-13562-5 P14]. But in contrasting a lost sense of solace with a supposedly malignant present where the famous are simply victims I feel that Inglis ascribes passivity to the star or the celebrity that somehow flies in the face of the more active relationship that we seem to have aspired to then and now.

Richard Dyer, who wrote more thoughtfully and more persuasively than anyone on stars writes in his monograph ‘Heavenly Bodies; (1986) “Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person of the “individual.” But “they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of the individual presents for all of us who live by it.” [Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society, BFI McMillan London 1986 – p8] And he continues some pages later “Stars represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed.” [Ibid P17]

We might try to develop Dyer’s reading of stars by considering one film star in particular and one pivotal role.

**IMAGE 3 – Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca**

It’s Humphrey Bogart in Casablanca directed by Michael Curtiz for Warner Brothers in 1942. The story, you’ll recall, takes place in Casablanca where Bogart as Rick Blane runs Rick's Café Américain in a city that is administered by the Vichy French with Claude Rains as the corrupt Chief of Police Captain Renault. It is of course the Germans who are really in charge. Casablanca is a earthbound version of limbo where desperate Europeans, refugees from Nazi Europe wait for visas that will allow them to take the plane to Lisbon and from there a ship to the United States. And so to freedom.

**IMAGE 4 – Casablanca Trail**

To this gloriously Hollywood version of Casablanca created in the Warner Brothers back lot in Burbank comes Ilse Lund, that’s Ingrid Bergman, married to Victor Laslo who’s escaped from a Nazi concentration camp and who wants to get to America to continue the fight against fascism. Ilse we learn has had a love affair with Rick in Paris but when the Nazi’s marched into the city she failed to join Rick and his pianist Sam on the train south. Victor it seems was not dead as she had thought but wounded having escaped the Nazis, and needed Ilse to help him.

Ilse knows that Rick has a pair of blank ‘letters of transit’ in his safe at the club that were stolen from German couriers. Will Rick give Victor and Ilse the passes? Will he insist that it is he who takes Ilse to the United States? Will Victor go leaving Ilse with Rick? As Sam’s great song, As Time Goes By puts it “It's still the same old story/A fight for love and glory /A case of do or die. /The world will always welcome lovers /As time goes by.

**IMAGE 5 – Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman**

In the final reel Rick puts duty before love and Ilse and Victor are hurried onto the plane for Lisbon as Bogart and Claude Rains decide to abandon Vichy Casablanca and job the Free French Forces across the desert,

Casablanca was made by Warner Brothers, a studio that was thought to be sympathetic to President Roosevelt and so to America entering the Second World War after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour. Precisely because it was Japan who destroyed the American fleet in Hawaii, however, there was a groundswell of opinion in the United States against the Roosevelt Administration’s Europe First policy, the decision to deal with Germany before moving against Japanese forces in the Pacific. This perhaps explains why the movie Casablanca was rushed into release to coincide with the Allied invasion of North Africa in November 1942.

So one way of reading this film is as a kind of fictional ‘Why We Fight’ tract explaining to the audience the necessity of the Europe First policy. And the sequences in Paris where Rick and Ilse first fall in love are cunningly designed to appeal to the particular American soft spot for Paris. The city where all good Americans go when they die. This is the American version of Europe, ‘a foggy day in London Town’ and George Gershwin’s ‘An American in Paris’.

But through Humphrey Bogart, with his star persona shaped around the ideal of rugged individualism, the film tackles another issue vital to the success of the war effort. America must work together to win. Individualism, that keystone in the building of an American cultural identity must be laid aside for the duration. So Rick overcomes his personal feelings and arranges for Ilse and Victor have the passes to continue their fight against the Nazis in America, even killing the SS Major Strasser in the process. An individual moral act, for sure, but committed on behalf of everyone. How else is the plane carrying Ilse and Victor to take off for Lisbon? Then Rick and Captain Renault, comrades now, set out to join the Free French forces, shoulder to shoulder. Through Humphrey Bogart America embraces the idea of collective action in the face of a common enemy.

**IMAGE 6 – John Wayne**

Now, do celebrities mediate politics and social issues in quite so direct way as the traditional film star? Stardom, after all, was constructed around the idea of the star’s unchanging core identity from role to role and film to film while, as I will argue later, changeability lies at the heart of celebrity. John Wayne is always John Wayne even when his career began riding into the last sunset; Joan Crawford is Joan Crawford and Bogart Bogart whether he is Rick Blane, Sam Spade, Philip Marlow or Charlie Allnut.

**IMAGE 7 – Victoria Beckham**

Victoria Adams on the other hand has been Posh Spice, Mrs Beckham, a supermodel, a mother and the designer behind dvb Style with Jeans and sunglasses – and, of course, the kind of handbag that is really a miniature cabin trunk. But in her very changeability perhaps Victoria Beckham has articulated a range of shifting attitudes about what it means to be a woman on the cusp of the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The feminist agenda of autonomy and equality is taken for granted in the idea of ‘girl power’ and thereafter she has lived some of the choices that are available for the newly empowered woman – marriage on her terms as much as those of her husband, a family and a career.

**IMAGE 8 – David and Victoria Beckham**

And maybe too she has played a modest role in redrawing the frontiers of masculinity in what has been dubbed the ‘post-feminist’ era. The ice is thin here so I intend to hug the shore, but when she encouraged her husband to step out in what the popular press christened a skirt but those in the fashion know knew to be a sarong, was she deliberately feminising one of England’s most gifted footballers?

**THEORISING THE CONSUMPTION OF CELEBRITY**

I am perhaps numbering too many trees. We need first to map the forest. So before I move too deeply into reading how the lives and times of individual celebrities impinge upon those of the legions of individual consumers for whom they have significance, we should locate these readings in a more general and a theoretical context.

Cultural theorists. Social anthropologists and sociologists have all attempted to theorise our relationship with celebrities. To map it too. In his book U*nderstanding Celebrity [P110 - Sage, Los Angeles, London. New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC – 2004] t*he Australian scholar Graeme Turner draws our attention to the work of Joshua Gamson *[Clams to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America, Berkeley California, University of California Press – 1994]/* Gamson, says Turner, ‘developed a typology that mapped the levels and characteristics of the audience’s engagement with the consumption of celebrity’ in his book *Claims to Fame.* The book was developed out of a series of focus groups designed to discover whether the nature of our interest in celebrities was affected by whether or not we were aware of the role played by the publicity industry the production of celebrity. Gamson was also interested in whether his focus groups that stories about celebrities were true or false, and whether that played any part in the pleasure they derived from an interest in celebrity.

**IMAGE 9 - Audience Types**

Gamson identifies five audience types. There is the ‘traditional’. These are men and women who believe that what they see and what they read is how it is and how it was. For them celebrity stories are indeed reported news and not in any sense manufactured. Indeed they have little knowledge or understanding of the processes involved in the production of celebrity. Cruelly, perhaps, Gamson describes their response as essentially passive, their interaction with celebrity; he writes’ involves ‘modelling, fantasy and identification.’ *[ibid P 146]* For this group Freddie Starr did indeed snack out on Lea La Salle’s pet hamster.

Second order traditionalists are a step up. Or to put it another way Freddie Starr ate the hamster but got someone to tell the press about it. As Gamson writes, these “audiences see a more complex narrative in which publicity mechanisms play a part but do not pose an obstacle to [holding the celebrities in high] esteem.” [Quoted p111 – Turner *Understanding Celebrity - Sage, Los Angeles, London. New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC – 2004]* This group trusted their own ability to distinguish between the authentic and the manufactured, and were more discerning when it came to seeing celebrities as role models, objects on which to project fantasies or simply identifying with them.

Postmodernists, says Gamson, ‘know about celebrity manufacture and seek out its evidence and its details, rejecting the story of the naturally rising story celebrity as naïve and false’. They know that the Hamster lives, that the story was concocted by journalists working closely with Freddie Starr’s PR advisor Max Clifford and that Lea La Salle was the girlfriend of a man who was then writing Starr’s autobiography. For Postmodernists celebrity stories are fictions that have to be unpacked. But knowing this in no way diminishes their enjoyment; they take pleasure in the artifice that surrounds the whole production of celebrity.

We can take the last two Game Player groups together. Both Gossipers and Detectives regard the coverage of celebrity in the media as semi-fictional. They are, says Gamson, not particularly concerned about the origins of these stories or indeed if they tell the truth about a celebrity or not. They both have a high level of understanding of the processes that are involved in the manufacture of celebrity. What distinguishes both groups are the uses to which they put the material that they gather about celebrity as ‘fodder for their own cultural activities …. Celebrity production is, for the ‘detective’, a giant discursive playground and for the ‘gossiper’ a rich social resource.’ *[p111 – Turner Understanding Celebrity - Sage, Los Angeles, London. New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC – 2004].* These consumers, says Gamson, ‘use celebrities not as models or fantasies but as opportunities’. *[P147 - Clams to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America, Berkeley California, University of California Press – 1994].*

So the Gamesplayers hurry to the office photocopier or the water cooler to spread the news of Freddie Starr’s misdemeanour mixing admiration and disapproval in equal measure. Celebrities, after all, are supposed to behave badly: they do things that we cannot. Detectives, on the other hand, find pleasure in working out exactly how the hamster story came about, and filing it away under ‘Media Conspiracies’. Freddie Starr’s midnight snack somehow confirms their own worth and value. They are uniquely ‘in the know’.

**IMAGE 10 - Sun Front Page - ‘Freddie Starr’**

Graeme Turner would argue that Gamson’s categories are a little too neat, that the punishment is made to fit the crime rather than the other way round. On the other hand this typology and others too is a useful reminder of the diverse ways in which we consume celebrity, that a one size fits all approach is at odds with our own experience and that of those about us. Gamson also reminds that the consumer is neither an innocent dupe or a savvy cultural critic, that most of have an understanding of what is involved in the manufacture of celebrity and that knowing the processes can actually enhance our pleasure. A small visual example makes this point.

**IMAGE 11 - Marilyn Monroe**

Here is one of the great celebrity pictures. Marilyn Monroe in New York City during the shooting of the Billy Wilder Movie ‘The Seven Year Itch’ with the breeze from a passing subway train blowing up her skirt. The conceit of the image is that while we know that Monroe is surrounded by the film crew, by photographers and a crowd of passers yet we somehow believe that she is doing this just for us. But that’s not my point. This is really the consumer’s pleasure in celebrity.

**IMAGE 12 - Marilyn Monroe Imitators**

Two visitors to Manhattan can become Marilyn for the camera. Identification and recreation. In the future everyone can dream that they are “world-famous for 15 minutes”. Why else do so many visitors insist on having their photograph taken on the zebra crossing in Abbey Road? For the record the scene with Marilyn Monroe on the subway grating was shot twice for the Wilder movie. The first take was shot at [Manhattan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhattan)'s [Lexington Avenue](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lexington_Avenue_%28Manhattan%29) at [52nd Street](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/52nd_Street_%28Manhattan%29) and the second done on a studio sound stage. And this is the version that you see in the finished film. According to one source “the original on-location footage's sound had been rendered useless by the over excited crowd present during filming whistling over Monroe's see-through panties.” *[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\_Seven\_Year\_Itch]*

To return to Gammon’s typology, Graeme Turner is surely right when he argues that we consume celebrity in different ways and often simultaneously. That we can be Gamson’s Traditionals believing in what we are shown while also Gamesplayers bending the material to our own purposes. A good example of this might be how audiences watch the X-Factor.

**IMAGE 13 - The X Factor Judges**

Like so much popular television now, the X Factor is a hybrid programme, a cross between a talent contest and a game show. When audiences watch the talent in action they believe in what they see, it’s a version of music entertainment, a television concert with the extra frisson that the acts are being judged. And to a great extent we willingly suspend our disbelief, what we know and may have seen or read about the grooming of the artists and the commercial imperatives that drive the whole project. These are kids ‘having a go’. However, when we come to vote, our fingers poised above the dialling pad we morph into Detectives or Gamesplayers. Determined to best the judges or make sure our new best friend wins. Remembering another corner of the television world, how else do you explain Anne Widdecombe or John Sergeant’s successes on Strictly Come Dancing? It wasn’t the dancing, that’s for sure.

If Joshua Gamson considers the uses we make of celebrity from the perspective of the consumer, Graeme Turner offers us a kind of top-down rather than bottom up account of this relationship. In ‘Understanding Celebrity’ writes about what he calls ‘the social function of celebrity’ *[P23 - – Turner Understanding Celebrity - Sage, Los Angeles, London. New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC – 2004].*

Celebrity, Turner argues, ‘generates 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 *[P23 – Ibid]* . An obvious example would be the extraordinary grief that was provoked by the death of Princess Diana in Britain and around the world.

**IMAGE 14 - Flowers for Princess Diana**

Thousands of people came to Kensington Palace to lay flowers in front of what had been the Diana’s home. A personal act for a woman that none of them can have known personally, an assumption of friendship with the dead Princess. Once the word para-social would have been used here pejoratively, to suggest that this assumption of friendship with Princess Diana was fulfilling an absence in a person’s life that possibly grew from their failure to establish proper, by which was meant genuine and even real, social relations. In the wake of the public grief at Diana’s death and comparable manifestations of public feeling, we have had to revise our ideas about para-social relations. Whether they fill a void in individual lives they are undoubtedly genuine in terms of human feelings, if nothing else.

A friend reminds me of an extraordinary moment he witnessed on the London underground in the middle of the week between Diana’s death in Paris and her funeral in London. It was the morning rush hour and the carriage was packed. At one end someone began to weep while reading a newspaper. Within minutes the whole carriage was in tears, some sobbing and some weeping silently. And then men and women standing and sitting began to talk, to comfort each other, even holding hands. Who is to say that this was not a manifestation of real feelings? To call it mass hysteria is a little glib.

**IMAGE 15 - Rojek Text**

Chris Rojek underlines my argument in a passage from his thoughtful study ‘Celebrity’,” To the extent that organised religion has declined in the West, celebrity culture has emerged as one of the replacement strategies that promotes new orders of meaning and solidarity. As such, notwithstanding the role that some celebrities have played in destabilising order, celebrity culture is a significant institution in the normative achievement of social integration.” *[P58 Celebrity – London Reaktion – 2001]*

It would seem then clear then that celebrity can be partly explained as ‘a location for the interrogation and elaboration of cultural identity, to borrow Graeme Turner’s phrase. *[p24 – Ibid]*  And in particular as confirming and extending our sense of individual identity. As P.D.Marshall writes in ‘Celebrity and Power’, “The types of message that the celebrity provides for the audience are modalised around forms of individual identification, social difference and distinction, and the universality of personality types. Celebrities represent subject positions that audiences can adopt or adapt in their formation of social identities. Each celebrity represents a complex form of audience-subjectivity that, when placed within a system of celebrities, provides the ground in which distinctions differences and oppositions are played out. The celebrity, then, is an embodiment a discursive battleground on the norms of individuality and personality within a culture,” [*P246 Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture, Minneapolis, MN, and University of Minnesota Press – 1997]*.

Celebrities it would seem confirm us in our urge to be unique. At the same time, as Fred Inglis has written, “Celebrity is invented on a large screen upon which is projected a huge and distorted magnification of some of society’s most contested values. *[P75 A Short History of Celebrity* *Princeton University Press – 2010 ISBN 978-0-691-13562-5].*

So underpinning our consumption of celebrity there is a fruitful tension between a desire for affirmation or confirmation of an individual identity but within a site that also negotiates the fault lines that run through our culture. So grief at the death of Princess Diana is both sorrow at the loss of a friend who supplied proof of self-worth and a cry of fury at the distribution of power in our society.

**IMAGE 16 - The Queen**

Who can forget the sight of the Queen at the gates of Buckingham Palace bowing slightly as Diana’s coffin passed by? We were allowed to feel that it was us, the weight of public opinion that had brought the royal family down to the streets to our level to acknowledge our grief. A very particular political and personal circle was squared at that moment. To borrow a phrase from the 1960s, the personal is always the political in our consumption of celebrity.

**IMAGE 17 - The Fall of Icarus**

**CELEBRITY NARRATIVES**

This is The Fall of Icarus painted by the Italian Baroque artist Carlo Saraceni, cruelly described as a first class painter of the second rank. But it's not the quality of the work that I want to explore but its subject matter.

Icarus was the son of Daedalus, an Athenian craftsman who was desperate to escape from Crete. King Minos for whom he had built the celebrated labyrinth to house the Minotaur had imprisoned him in his palace for having assisted Ariadne to help Theseus to destroy the terrifying half-man half bull and then find his way out of the labyrinth.

In order to escape from Crete the ever-inventive Daedalus made two pairs of wings from wax and feathers. One for himself and the other for his son Icarus. Before they took to the air he warned Icarus that he should not fly too close the sun. But dizzy with the excitement of flight. Icarus soars up wards and so the wax melts, the feathers fall and Icarus plunges into the sea below.

This myth of Icarus seems to me to be the dominant narrative of contemporary celebrity. A version of ‘from rags to riches and back to rags’, coloured by ‘the purposeful malignance’ that Fred Inglis noted in the passage from his ‘A Short History of Celebrity’ that I quoted at the beginning of this lecture. There he wrote about “how admiration has become twisted by spite, gossip by vindictiveness, and how the careless envy which with teenagers once adored the Beatles turned into the purposeful malignance with which Princess Diana was pursued to her death.” [*A Short History of Celebrity* – Fred Inglis -Princeton University Press – 2010 ISBN 978-0-691-13562-5 P14]. And the media play an essential role in this process, building and buttressing celebrity on the way up and then reversing the process. It begins with the red carpet and ends with the a long lens paparazzi shot of the former celebrity slumped over a table littered with bottles.

**IMAGE 18 - Britney Spears**

This is Britney Spears at the height of a career that has seen her sell in excess of 100 million records world wide; an icon on teenage bed room walls, princess of the airwaves for middle-aged men driving around that contemporary version of Dante’s Third Circle of Hell, the M25 and on it’s overseas equivalents, and the font, so to speak, of all good copy. Then came her first marriage to a childhood friend that lasted a mere 55 hours, a second marriage to the dancer Kevin Federline and children. When Spears filed for divorce from Federline in November 2006, the wax on her wings was already melting. On February 16, 2007, she checked into in a [drug rehabilitation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drug_rehabilitation) facility in [Antigua](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antigua) for less than a day. The following night, she shaved her head with electric clippers at a hair salon in [Tarzana, California](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarzana,_California).

**IMAGE 19 - Britney Spears – Shaved Head**

It would be easy to blame the media for rounding on Britney Spears. But it was Spears who chose to shave he head and presumably to permit the pictures. Nevertheless, Fred Inglis is surely right when he suggests that we who follow celebrities have a stake in their fall from grace as much as their rise to success. It’s a kind of schadenfreude, a pleasure in their downfall, proof that they are indeed no better than they should be. Or to put it another way a vindication of ourselves. That said there are times when you want to look away. This is Jade Goody’s interview with The News of the World when she had been asked to leave the Big Brother House in January 2007 after being accused of racist bullying of the Indian actress Shilpa Shetty, an event which provoked what has all the hallmarks of a modern witch-hunt, with the press in full pursuit and politicians wading in. Channel 4 Television was finally censored by the regulator OFCOM and Big Brother was rested by the network for a season.

**IMAGE 20 - Jade Goody NOW Interview**

It’s not the tears that are shocking, nor the rambling thoughts of a woman who is clearly on the edge of a nervous breakdown. It’s quite as much the mismatch between the Jade that was and the Jade that is here being interviewed for the News of the World. Or to put it another way the Jade that we thought we knew as a friend - brash, loudmouthed, the epitome of Essex Girl but with a heart of gold. One of us - has now become a young woman who is everything that we might like to hide about ourselves. We long to be like the ploughman in Breughel’s painting of the Icarus story which is so well understood by the W.H.Auden in his poem ‘Musée de Beaux Arts’.

**IMAGE 21 - Breughel the Fall of Icarus**

“In Breughel's Icarus …. how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may   
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.”

After the fall of Jade we too wish to sail calmly on in search of the next idol whose feet will all too soon be revealed as made of clay. For celebrities, however, the question is how to avoid this catastrophe, how not to fall to earth, or rather into the sea in a shower of feathers and melted wax. The simple answer is reinvention.

No one demonstrated the art of reinvention better than Princess Diana and no one understood how essential to this process the media were. Consider the timing of her now celebrated interview with Martin Bashir. Diana’s biographer Sarah Bradford suggests. “On Diana’s specific instruction the BBC released their press announcement on 14 November, an unwelcome 47th birthday surprise for Charles, on an official visit to Tokyo. Photographs taken at the time show him cutting a celebratory cake, his face expressing total dismay.” *[P293 – Diana – Sarah Bradford- Penguin Books, Pbk London 2006]*. And Bradford’s admirable biography is full of examples of how Diana worked with the media.

The pictures they published over the sixteen years from her engagement to Prince Charles to her death in Paris, after the car in which she was travelling with Dodi Fayed crashed into the thirteenth pillar of the underpass at the Place d’Alma on August 31st 1997, tell the story of this reinvention.

**IMAGE 22 - Princess Diana’s Engagement**

On her engagement Diana Spencer, as she was then, looks every inch a blushing English rose. The puppy fat is still lingering and she peers out diffidently from under her fringe protected by her husband to be. Hardly the truth since we all know that she was taller than him. But conventional iconography gives us the strong man embracing the little woman.

**IMAGE 23 - The Wedding**

Here’s Cinderella, the girl who got her Prince and in this version of the Royal fairy story married him and kissed him in public too. Then comes motherhood and notice the deliberate informality of it all.

**IMAGE 24 - Diana and William and Harry**

Hoop earrings and not a pearl in view. Diana’s hair wet and she and her two sons laughing at their father. It could be a snapshot from any family album.

**IMAGE 25 – Diana and Little Girl**

Then it’s royal duties in public, but a royal mother and always with an interest in children. Notice the hair too. No one better understood how to use her hair to shape an image. Here it’s cut short, every inch the modern mum to be found in magazines for women and advertising. The blonde streaking too is unmistakeably the late eighties nudging the nineties.

**IMAGE 26 – Diana with AIDS patient**

This is a radical change of image. Diana shaking hands with a man suffering from AIDS. In a deliberate break with the protocol that members of the Royal Family don’t touch much, she shows she is her own woman. The People’s Princess is under construction as the marriage begins to fall apart.

**IMAGE 27 - Charles and Diana**

The War of the Wales was out in the open and Diana proved herself infinitely more skilled in getting her case into the headlines and on the front pages. She had made a personal friend of Richard Kay, the Royal Correspondent of the Daly Mail, as Sarah Bradford notes in her biography of Diana. On the night that Charles admitted his adultery with Camilla Parker Bowles in his television interview with Jonathan Dimbleby, Diana fulfilled a long standing engagement at the Serpentine Gallery in London’s Hyde Park.

**IMAGE 28 – Diana in the black dress**

She wore ‘a sexy, clinging black dress which showed off her tanned, toned legs. Her whole manner radiated confidence’, writes Sarah Bradford *[P264– Diana – Sarah Bradford- Penguin Books, Pbk London 2006]*. Diana supermodel was about to take to the international runway. And with a suitable portfolio of pictures.

**IMAGE 29 – Diana**

A supermodel with a social conscience, who cared about her causes, like the campaign for the banning of landmines. Even then Diana looked and dressed the part, which is not to doubt her sincerity but to underline her understanding of how to sustain a celebrity identity in the face of the baleful Icarus narrative.

**IMAGE 30 – Diana and landmine victims**

I have looked at no more than a handful of the transformations through which Princess Diana’s celebrity identity morphed. And it continues to surprise me that nowhere in the huge literature generated by this woman’s short life and untimely death is there any detailed account of this process. So much of this literature proposes itself as biography rather than cultural analysis thus playing a variation on the public private duality that is at the heart of our interest in celebrity. Biography offers us the promise of the private life behind the public face, that trope which is at the heart of celebrity magazines like Hello and OK!

**IMAGE 31– Diana and Dodi**

So the penultimate chapter of Diana’s life is reported as the unlikely love affair between herself and Dodi Fayed, rather than her joining a version of what used to be called the International Jet Set. And before that Café Society. How right it is, culturally speaking, that Diana’s final holiday should have been a cruise in the Mediterranean. Ever since the 1930’s, and certainly after Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson had sailed on the steam yacht *Nahlin* in 1936 this was where in Noel Coward’s cruel description Nescafe Society met and amused itself.

Diana’s final celebrity identity was not one she chose for herself.

**IMAGE 32 – Diana’s Funeral – Girl Praying**

On the eve of Diana’s funeral the historian David Starkey remarked in a radio interview on what had all the appearances of ‘a new Marian cult’ with flowers in her memory and visions of the dead Princess. If it was Mary, then it was Mary Mater Dolorosa. She who suffers with us and for us, a channel for our prayers for grace. It was above all a kind of sanctification.

And this is the point where the life and death of Diana touches that of Jade Goody. Goody understood as well as Diana that a celebrity identity needed to be continually reinvented if it wasn’t to fall to earth.

**IMAGE 33 – Jade Goody in Big Brother 2002**

In the third series of Big Brother in 2002 she created a public persona out her apparent ignorance, mistaking Rio de Janeiro as a person not the second city of Brazil and apparently being unaware that Aberdeen was in Scotland and that the United States was an English speaking nation. On being evicted from the house she established a fruitful relationship with the media which led to her own television programmes and the launch of her own products, notably a perfume called Ssh. Nothing shushed Goody who lived her private life on the front pages of the tabloids, particularly her relationship with Jack Tweed.

In a sense Jade Goody fulfilled Andy Warhol’s prophecy that "In the future*,* everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes”. Reality TV programmes like Big Brother have created celebrities out of ordinary people. Not in their millions certainly, but in their thousands. According to Frances Bonner as many as 20,000 ordinary people appear with speaking roles on or screens every year. [P61-2 – Ordinary Television: Analyzing Popular TV - Sage, London – 2003].

**IMAGE 34 – Jade Goody ‘Ssh’**

Then came Jade Goody’s downfall. There’s a revealing passage in her autobiography ‘Jade - Fighting to the End.’ “By the end of 2006 I was experiencing the biggest high of my career. My perfume was selling like hotcakes and making me more money than I could ever have dreamed; my first book had become a number one bestseller …. And I had three reality-TV shows under my belt. With more being talked of for the next year. I would never have thought that four years after going into the Big Brother house I’d still be in the public eye and people would still be interested in what I had to say or want to buy things with my blooming name on it! But I was eternally grateful and never took it for granted for one second. I had achieved a lot but I was under no illusions – I knew it could all end as easily as it started.” [P72 – Jade – Fighting to the End – John Blake, London 2009 Pbk]

At one level this is an entirely conventional response to fame: it came unexpectedly and overnight and it could all end tomorrow. This is what readers expect. But this comes at the moment in Jade Goody’s story when she is about to agree to go back into the Big Brother house for a second time and with her family. Taken in this context Goody reveals herself as adept as any celebrity in understanding the need to renew her identity.

**IMAGE 35 – Jade Goody in Big Brother 2007**

In the event it was the disaster that we have already heard about with Jade summarily evicted from the house for ‘racist bullying’ and dropped by her sponsors and supporters, her agent too. According to her autobiography they even removed her perfume from shop displays.

Scandal and its messenger gossip are intrinsic to celebrity. As Fred Inglis says,”A scandal, I suppose, is a tale told by in which the permissible or admirable aspects of character are isolated by transgression. Celebrity by definition attracts scandal. It does so first, because fame invites envy, and envy denigration. This motion is nowadays become industrialised by the production and sale of celebrity television and magazines, let alone by advertising, the industry of propaganda.” [P183 - *A Short History of Celebrity* – Fred Inglis -Princeton University Press – 2010 ISBN 978-0-691-13562-5]

What then after the scandal? The most radical survival weapon in the celebrity’s armoury: rehab. Sign into the Betty Ford Clinic or The Priory and it’s a kind of ‘time out’, that or appear on Larry King live and admit everything. Both are a form of penance and if paid properly may well allow you to rescue your celebrity life. Should we think of these as clinics where you can stitch together a new public persona? Cosmetic surgery for celebrity? It worked for George Michael and it worked for Jade both of whom were born again celebrities after Rehab or Larry King.

It worked for Jade, that is, until when she taking part in the Indian version of Big Brother, Bigg Boss she was told that she was suffering from cancer and needed to fly home for urgent treatment.

**IMAGE 36 – Jade Goody leaving Indian BB**

On returning home Goody’s reinventions proceeded at a dizzying pace as her health deteriorated. She published a new autobiography, appeared in pantomime, and was back on television in a reality television documentary, *Living with Jade Goody* part of Living TV’s *Living With . . .* series.

**IMAGE 37 – Cover of OK!**

Goody was guided through the final stages of her life by Max Clifford, who we might think of as a kind of celebrity ringmaster as well as the ringmaster of celebrity. With Clifford advising her Jade Goody turned the most private moment of her life, her imminent death into a series of public celebrity events, A film "Jade's cancer battle" was broadcast and there were plans for more programmes if Goody felt strong enough to take part. Then very publicly she married Jack Tweed.

**IMAGE 38 – Wedding of Jade and Jack**

The happy couple had signed an exclusive £700,000 deal with OK! Magazine for exclusive photographs of the ceremony at which Goody wore a £3,500 Manuel Mota dress, given to her by the owner of Harrods Mohamed Al Fayed.

Jade Goody’s funeral took place on April 4th 2009.

**IMAGE 39 – Jade Goody’s Funeral**

If her death was not quite the kind of sanctification that Diana’s had been twelve years earlier, if the crowds were smaller in East London and the flowers fewer, something similar had taken place. Jade had joined the ranks of the good celebrities. Her passing was even accorded a ministerial blessing. The health secretary And Burnham declared "Jade's bravery and openness in her fight against cervical cancer has brought home to young women across the country the importance of regularly going for these checks."

Disease and even death play a powerful role in the construction of celebrity. We are reminded of our own mortality. As Frances Bonner writes, “… celebrity has become one of the principal ways in whichinformation is disseminated, including information about such apparently different fields as entertainment and politics. Even health advice is provided through celebrities encounters with illness and their recovery.”*[P86 -* Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity Ed Jessica Evans and David Hesmondhalgh – Open University Press – 2005] Or death in the case of Jane Goody.

One final thought. Those whom the Gods love die young. Jade Goody was 27, Princess Diana 36. Dying young perhaps grants a celebrity a kind of lease on cultural immortality that is different from that we give to those who live on to a time when ripeness is all. We, alas, grow older as they remain young forever. In that sense they perhaps fulfil our yearning for eternal youth as well as an intimation of immortality.

Thank you.

©Professor Christopher Cook, Gresham College 2011

About the Speaker

Christopher Cook is a broadcaster and journalist. His work can be found in places such as the Guardian and the New Statesman, as well as on BBC radio. His current academic work includes positions at Syracuse University, London Centre and American University (London Programme).