

## Introduction

In the twenty-first century, celebrity culture and celebrity journalism are everywhere: they are inescapable fixtures in our media landscape and our everyday lives. Celebrity culture has become a central, dominant, and structuring force in American life, leading some to note that our society has become “celebritized” or “celebrified.”<sup>1</sup> Whether you’re standing in the checkout line at the supermarket or drugstore, checking your Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, or Twitter feed, or, of course, simply turning on your TV, celebrities—the stories they tell, the stories about them—bombard us from every media outlet. The famous face is ubiquitous, it seems to spring up in every direction, an undeniable presence that surrounds and consumes us, as we consume it. While this is a revolution especially of the past twenty-five years, its origins go much farther back. This book provides an overview of that revolution, its repressed history, the underestimated cultural work it has done, its consequences, and especially the role that new communications technologies have played in enabling it.

Yes, of course, from Mary Pickford to Bette Davis to Marilyn Monroe, stars claimed the center stage of American life in the twentieth century. But in 1980, only 19.9 percent of homes had cable TV (and most cable companies only offered up to twelve channels), the celebrity magazines had not yet gone through their rapid, multiple mitoses, there was no reality TV that instantly manufactured stars, there were not yet celebrity chefs and celebrity chief executive officers, and there was no Internet or social media. Now we have all these. Thus, the status of celebrity culture and gossip has changed dramatically, especially since the early twenty-first century. Celebrity culture and gossip, except for truly major, high-profile romances or divorces (like those between superstars Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in the 1960s and ’70s), were seen as down-market, trashy, irrelevant fare that educated or respectable middle-class people should avoid. But today these are impossible

to avoid and, more importantly, knowing about celebrities—at least some of them anyway—is now an often necessary part of one’s cultural arsenal of knowledge. The tone has changed as well, especially with the multiplication of gossip magazines, blogs, and social media in the twenty-first century and their delight in scandal and often the derision of celebrities as well as the opportunity for us to feel closer to and even interact with those who are well known. What is the significance of all this, for us, and our society?

Celebrity culture today consists of four major building blocks: the celebrity, of course, the media, the public, and the celebrity production industry, which consists of managers, agents, promoters, and some elements of the media, from gossip magazines to Instagram. Celebrity itself has typically involved four elements: a person, some kind of achievement, subsequent publicity, and then what posterity has thought about them ever since.<sup>2</sup> Thus celebrity can be, of course, fleeting and banal: today’s star could easily be tomorrow’s has-been. But the *fact* of celebrity culture, its permanence and growth, the industry that supports it, the huge profits it generates, the distractions it provides—and promotes—these are no longer trivial. Celebrity gossip and culture used to be confined to fan magazines, a few tabloids, and certain TV talk shows. Now, celebrities and stories about them are everywhere, in the nightly news and in politics, on the covers of women’s and public affairs magazines, on reality TV shows and multiple, proliferating TV talk shows, and especially on our smartphones. Indeed, the country’s forty-fifth president was a former reality TV show star, who converted his status as a celebrity into political power. When what used to be more on the margins of the media becomes absolutely central to it, and thus to our culture, we need to understand how and why, and what the implications are for our society and for us as individuals.

What, then, do we mean when we speak of a celebrity and why they can matter so powerfully to so many people? *Celebrity* derives from the Latin root *celebrem*, which suggests that one is celebrated, but also *thronged*, flocked by a crowd.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, celebrities are persons who live their lives in the public eye; by definition, they are highly visible, known to many. Such mass visibility relies on and is made possible by the media; thus some have argued that celebrity is “essentially a media production.”<sup>4</sup> More to the point, celebrity gives one a kind of capital,

which accrues from “accumulated media visibility that results from recurrent media representations.”<sup>5</sup> Celebrities are enviable because they are given greater presence, a wider scope of agency and activity in the world; they are allowed to move on the public stage while others watch.<sup>6</sup> Celebrities are deferred to as unique, entitled individuals: they go to the head of the line, or don’t have to stand in one at all; they rise above the herd. They gain additional economic power by endorsing products and brands, and they are invited into expanded social networks, where they get to meet other powerful or famous people. Celebrity status confers upon a person not only economic power but also a certain discursive power. Celebrities have a voice above others—a voice that is legitimately significant. If an ordinary person seeks to bring attention to a national or international problem, few listen. When Oprah or George Clooney or Selena Gomez do or say something, they get a national and even international platform, and so the celebrity capital they possess can be converted into other kinds of capital—political, philanthropic, and the like.<sup>7</sup> As the Harvey Weinstein scandals and #metoo movement dramatized, celebrity voices can bring attention to problems that have vexed everyday people for decades, in this case sexual harassment and misconduct.

What is the difference between fame and celebrity? Being a celebrity today of course means being well known. But in ancient and medieval times, one could indeed be famous—as a king, queen, or emperor, as a successful military leader—but not necessarily constantly visible. When identities and social roles were quite fixed by birth and social position, and demarcated, between peasants, artisans, the aristocracy, and then royalty, there was a line of authority from top to bottom, with those at the bottom rarely seeing those at the top. Fame was reserved for those rare people who were known because of their hereditary positions or extraordinary achievements; there was an aura around them; they were remote and inaccessible. As the historian Neal Gabler has noted, “Indeed, fame was less likely to be sought than imposed as a consequence of accomplishment or office. In effect, it was a mantle one wore, not something one chased.”<sup>8</sup> So fame rested on distance, deference to greatness (whether achieved or inherited), and often adoration. Compared to today there were very few outlets for widespread visibility. The proliferation of media and communications technologies beginning in the nineteenth century, especially those involving the mechanical reproduction

of images like photography and film, changed all that and enabled the democratization of fame. The big change, as Gabler noted, is that now the whole point of being famous is visibility: “being seen on the right pages and at the right places with the right people. To hold yourself aloof seems pathological.”

Today, some twenty-first-century celebrities, it is said, are famous simply for being famous. Scholars such as Leo Lowenthal argued that there exist different types of celebrities—some who are known for their hard work, talents, and achievements, and others who are infamous for their sensational lifestyles, scandals, and pure entertainment value.<sup>9</sup> Chris Rojek divided celebrity status into three categories: ascribed, meaning you were born into fame, like a member of a royal family or child of a celebrity; achieved, meaning you earned it through admired accomplishments; and attributed, which is a media-generated fame, such as a reality TV star or someone involved in a scandal.<sup>10</sup> Thus, while we may tend to think of celebrities as models of excellence—the smartest, fastest, and most beautiful, the most talented—they may also be models of scorn—the notorious, the wasteful, the failed. Still others consider them as mere irritants, purposeless chimeras.

Celebrity culture is not only about the hallowed few who find the spotlight—it is also, perhaps especially, about the fans who consume it and the pleasures we find in that consumption. We relish the escape, the fantasies of wealth, beauty, and deference, and the ability to feel superior to people who may have (or once had) “it all,” but now have gained weight, married poorly, or truly embarrassed themselves in public. And the “behind-the-scenes” blogs and Twitter wars, with the supposed real dirt that exposes publicists’ spin or gives a sense of being in the know, convey a sense of being able to rip open the curtains hiding the great and powerful Oz.

Celebrities are the conduits for our dreams—if they can do it, I can do it; I want to do what they get to do. Whatever the category of celebrity, these individuals offer up visions of potential; they serve as avatars who perform our dreams, and sometimes our nightmares. They warn us of what could be if we choose the wrong path. By publicly performing their own scandals and controversies, they serve as glitzy stand-ins for everyday issues of deep concern to people, from infidelity and divorce, to financial ruin, to illness and aging, and to broader social issues, like

sexism, racism, and homophobia. Celebrity culture polices the boundaries of everyday behavior: what celebrities are praised for, we should emulate; what they are reviled for, we should spurn. They may give us hope for the future, warn us of what could be if we choose the wrong path, and even make us feel thankful for the ordinariness of our own lives. “Stars matter,” as Richard Dyer writes, “because they act out aspects of life that matter to us.”<sup>11</sup>

For these reasons, various scholars have argued that celebrities—and the industries that produce and maintain them—reinforce, or at times challenge, certain dominant cultural ideologies. Of course they embody standards of beauty, handsomeness, and an idealized body. They also help to create and sustain our dreams of upward mobility, especially in an era of increased inequality between the rich and everyone else. In this way, they can also even work to justify economic and social hierarchies. Some, like James Dean in the 1950s or Tom Cruise in the 1980s, functioned as models of male youthful rebellion or bravado, while Madonna in the 1980s and 1990s and Beyoncé in the 2010s were models of female strength, agency, and defiance of traditional constraints placed on women. In this way, celebrities and the narratives that circulate around them serve as “vessels,” which perform and, in doing so, reveal the hopes and anxieties of the cultural moment in which they exist.<sup>12</sup>

But celebrities do not only reflect—or even come to alter—our cultural values; they also speak to our ideas about ourselves. The nature of celebrity, which claims to offer us public visions of private persons, may have a deep impact on the way in which we think and feel about our bodies, our relationships, and our very identities. Indeed, contemporary celebrity journalism obsessively tracks the personal, “private” lives of famous figures, chronicling (and critiquing) the minutiae of their lives, while inviting audiences to do the same. Twenty-first-century celebrity, therefore, combined with the explosion of social media, have been criticized for allegedly helping to foster a generation of narcissists, obsessed with publicly performing their lives (usually online) and willing to adopt for themselves the relentless judgment that accompanies such performances.<sup>13</sup>

With these critiques in mind, it may be easy to dismiss celebrities as consumerist booby traps, meant to suck us into purchasing the latest designer bag, fad diet, or ridiculously expensive pair of jeans. Or as

mere distractions, simply deflecting attention away from current events and the depressing stream of stories that dominate the evening news. Or as trivialities, social climbers grasping for Andy Warhol's infamous fifteen minutes of fame, perhaps snagging only six or seven in today's frantic media economy. You would not, of course, be wrong. Yet these are some of the very reasons that celebrities deserve our attention. The story of celebrity is the story of our cultural experience, particularly in our contemporary society where they dominate our popular culture. The mechanisms by which individuals become famous, the ideological visions that celebrities represent and communicate, the reasons why "ordinary" people are attracted to stars, and the influence that this cycle of production and consumption has on our culture is profound, growing, and worthy of our attention.

That celebrity is often trivialized and marginalized in journalistic, academic, and political discourse, despite being intensely popular and generating billions of dollars, makes the study of fame all the more important. We should not be pooh-poohed into thinking that celebrity culture is *merely entertainment*. Because that dismissal urges us to ignore an industry that promotes certain kinds of values and attitudes, about gender, sexuality, success, class, race, relationships, and happiness, while utterly minimizing others. These values also affirm which kinds of people deserve admiration, comfort, and success and which kinds do not. In the pages that follow, we will critically examine the evolution of celebrity in an effort to develop our understanding of the relationship between famous figures, media technologies, and audiences. By attending to the history and evolution of these relationships, we can better understand the ways in which media systems and the famous figures they produce reflect our pleasures, values, and aspirations back to us in their glittering images. We can also appreciate that many aspects of celebrity culture actually have a long history, and that once electronic media technologies developed in the nineteenth century and beyond, significant precedents were set about celebrity production and consumption that are still with us today.

Fame is not an immutable phenomenon, but rather one that has emerged, proliferated, persisted, and changed thanks to evolving technological, cultural, and ideological mechanisms. Contemporary media modalities, including the Internet and social media, mobile technologies, and an ever-growing array of digital platforms, have created a boon

in the celebrity industry, spawning a vast cohort of stars and an equally impressive bevy of news programs, blogs, and magazines that endlessly clamor for new personas to attract our attention, and our dollars. With social media in particular, the barriers to becoming well known have been crumbling. So celebrity should not be seen as a static, fixed state, but an ongoing process requiring the constant renewal of media visibility; otherwise, your celebrity capital declines. After all, celebrity is a disposable commodity (the “has-been”)—in the media today, gone tomorrow. Thus, there is constant competition to stay in the media spotlight and garner that increasingly scarce and overburdened resource, audience attention. Today, with so many competing 24/7 platforms for individual promotion, with celebrity status more attainable for many yet also more fleeting, celebrity has become “status on speed.”<sup>14</sup>

But in order to understand the explosion of twenty-first-century celebrification and the ways it functions in an urbanized, globalized, and hyperlinked culture, we need to look back, before the advent of the smartphone and Facebook, to the relationship between mass communication technologies and the evolution of celebrity in our history. Emphasizing this link, between the particular affordances of different media, both traditional and digital, and the nature and proliferation of celebrity culture, is one of our central points. As Richard Schickel argues in his study of fame, “The history of celebrity and the history of communications technology over the last century are very closely linked.”<sup>15</sup> Yet while Schickel suggests that celebrity is a phenomenon that only truly begins in the twentieth century, we look further back in time, especially to the nineteenth century when modes of mass communication and forms of mass entertainments proliferated, in an effort to trace the production, evolution, and uses of celebrity and its effects on the everyday lives of ordinary people.

Media technologies have, during different eras, enabled individuals to broadcast themselves—their ideas and images—to a large-scale audience. In this way, mediated representation allows the individual to become known by the many. The media, therefore, whether magazines, radio, the Internet, or Twitter, have been central to the production and maintenance of celebrity. Each media technology critically shapes and refines the way in which we come to know, perceive, and interpret the ideas and images it presents. As David Schmid writes, “The introduction

of each new media technology represents a decisive shift in both the types of fame available in a culture and the ability of that culture to disseminate fame.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, contemporary media technologies, in which multidirectional interaction and response have supplanted the broadcast model, continue to redefine our relationship with famous figures. Because the television interview and on-camera close-ups simulate face-to-face interaction, and because interviewers have become more prying and more unctuous, audiences can establish (and imagine) a new form of intimacy with stars that did not previously exist. And now, with celebrity Facebook pages and Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat accounts, fans can feel an even greater familiarity and intimacy with totally unknown and unknowable people. While this is a pseudointimacy, intimacy at a distance, an intimacy that is not reciprocated, there is certainly a great pleasure for fans here—they can feel they are in the know, in an inner circle. Yet, at the same time, we can now eavesdrop on celebrities, put the stars under surveillance, without having to respond, be clever, or expose ourselves to them.

Who becomes a celebrity and why? What is our role in celebrity production, in who gets to stay in the spotlight and who doesn’t? The book begins by reviewing the various theoretical approaches that have sought to explain the power and significance of celebrity culture, the ideological work it does, and the relationship between stars and audiences. Why do we even have celebrities, and why do they matter to us as individuals and as a society? In tracing the evolution of academic thought on the subject of fame and fandom, we may better appreciate not only the power of the stars themselves but also the scope and potential of the relationship between ordinary people and celebrities.

### Fame and the Quest for Immortality

What is the allure, the pull, of fame? Why do some people actively seek it and others—many of us—fantasize about it? In the twenty-first century, being a celebrity seems to bring so much: wealth, of course, being known in a way others are not, being envied, being deferred to, having other famous friends who, presumably, are exciting and fun.

The desire for fame is nothing new; it has existed for millennia. It springs from another deep human fantasy, a longing: the desire for

immortality. Fame seems to promise an escape from one of the basic inevitabilities of life—death. For certain celebrities, even years after they die, their presence continues to exist, living on in the images and recordings that made them famous. Posters of Marilyn Monroe and Audrey Hepburn still grace people’s walls, and images of celebrities as diverse as Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz are “managed” by rights companies so that, decades after their deaths, they can still be used to sell products. They are gone, but still with us, in an uncanny mode of eternal life through media imagery. Like secular gods, the famous defy the rules of human existence while also providing us with aspirational models to worship. They continue to live on after their death through us, their fans. It is we who make the stars immortal as we worship and deify our favorite actors or musicians. Elvis’s Graceland has become a sacred site for his fans where people still leave flowers on his grave (some even believing he’s still alive). Fans collect autographs or pictures, or even possessions of their idols, documenting the existence of stars and possessing some modicum of their being, creating their own celebrity reliquaries.

Thousands of years ago, this quest for immortality, to be remembered by posterity, was restricted to a very privileged few. In ancient times, as Leo Braudy notes in his history of fame, with kings, like the pharaohs, also seen as gods, “fame meant a grandeur almost totally separate from ordinary human nature.” There was an “extraordinary exaltation of a single man” through art, his headgear and clothing, palaces, and through monumental tombs like the pyramids, all testifying to and asserting his power and immortality. The tombs of the Chinese emperors, Mayan rulers, and Egyptian pharaohs contained inscriptions, amulets, and objects that proclaimed the deceased’s singularity and influence. These relics showed the powerful individual imbued with godlike powers, their persona linked to mythic narratives and imagery through carvings, paintings, and decorations of the body.<sup>17</sup>

For the ancient Greeks, it was heroism, the “pursuit of honor,” achieved primarily through war and conquest, that allowed men—through the legends about them—to live beyond death. Epics such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* immortalized heroic achievements and inspired the person Leo Braudy calls the “first famous person,” Alexander the Great (356–323 BC). Alexander did win fame through his wide-ranging

conquests, but, as Braudy notes, “Nothing was ever enough for him.”<sup>18</sup> He sought fame not through some predetermined, ascribed status, like being the son of a king or emperor, but through his achievements. He was determined to have these achievements, and his image, widely known and preserved for posterity. As Karsten Dahmen notes, “Much of Alexander’s importance lies in his posthumous fame.”<sup>19</sup>

Today, we may not think that we are participating in the reproduction of fame when digging around in our pockets for spare change, but in ancient societies coins played an important role in self-promotion. They were one of the earliest mass-produced technologies for circulating fame, and set the precedent for presidents and kings to have their faces on coins and later on bills. Alexander the Great imprinted his likeness on coins in order to make his image and authority known to his subjects, although it was after his death that Greek and Roman rulers promulgated most of the coins bearing his likeness in an effort to be allied with his empire-building.<sup>20</sup> Widely circulated and able to withstand time and touch, coins allowed for the spread of the ruler’s face across wide swaths of territory. The power of the coin lay not only in its ability to provide a visual representation of a leader whom most subjects would never see, but also to couple that image with phrases and iconography that conveyed a sense of authority and gravitas. When new coins appeared, the person on the street knew there was a new government and a new leader. Alexander minted coins as he conquered, circulating his likeness to current and future subjects. In his monetary renderings, his features were blended with those of Greek gods and icons of mythology like Hercules. In this way, Alexander’s coins not only captured his likeness but also linked him with recognizable qualities and themes with which he wished to be associated.<sup>21</sup> While Alexander died at the age of thirty-three, his fame lived on through the continued circulation of these coins.<sup>22</sup>

There were other representations of Alexander: paintings and mosaics (he had himself depicted “clad in panther skin,” which was normally associated with the gods),<sup>23</sup> portrait heads and busts, and statues in stone and bronze.<sup>24</sup> Sculpture also allowed for the public display of one’s face and body. The human figure carved in stone provided a lasting depiction of the subject’s entire body, and then positioned that body in the public space, for all to see. Imposing and grand, statues confronted

the viewer with the presence of their subjects, a moment of poise, or of active heroism, frozen in time and publicly memorialized; the person had to be approached as a monument.<sup>25</sup> The longevity and expense of the materials used to construct such works—bronze, marble, granite—suggest that its subject’s influence will extend well into the future, impervious to the changes of time.

With the spread of Christianity, especially after the fall of the Roman Empire, sculpture went into decline because of the belief that statuary verged on idolatry.<sup>26</sup> One replacement was portraiture, which served to bring together the king’s “two bodies”—the mortal body that aged and died, and the symbolic body of the monarch. A tradition of deifying portraiture in order to establish and enhance a ruler’s fame and prestige dates back at least to medieval and early Renaissance artists who made similar connections by painting rulers in Christ-like poses.<sup>27</sup>

Kings and queens especially grasped the value of the portrait in affirming their importance, and thus a new profession arose, the “court painter” retained by royal or noble families. They often managed a group of assistants or apprentices, all of whom produced various forms of imagery—portrait miniatures, illuminated manuscripts, heraldic seals—to circulate and affirm the royals’ authority and fame. There was especial emphasis on the royals’ face. By the late 1500s and early 1600s, in England, for example, portraits of rulers from William the Conqueror to Henry VIII would be displayed, often in chronological sequence, in the grand homes of the aristocracy but also in civic buildings and educational establishments. These paintings could be inexpensively reproduced based on previous portraits and copied by artists.<sup>28</sup> And they cemented and circulated the royals’ historic significance long after their deaths.

Until the Renaissance period and the emergence of early capitalism in the 1500s, fame had been restricted primarily to royal and religious leaders. But with the growth in trade and the rise of a moneyed merchant class, portrait painting emerged as a more portable, more accessible means of recording and displaying one’s individual likeness and his or her success. “Portraiture,” as Shearer West writes about the history of the genre, was “very important to celebrity, as the cultivation of celebrity depends to an extent upon the familiarity and dissemination of likeness.”<sup>29</sup> As the number of public professions increased, those

aspiring to importance realized how portraits could make them seem more symbolically valuable, more powerful.<sup>30</sup> As Braudy notes, “Everyone who made a career in public—and the number of public professions was speedily increasing—was being made to realize how both art and printing could make him more symbolic, more essential, and more powerful.”<sup>31</sup> In turn, as the demand for portraits grew, artists who benefitted from the patronage of the rich also became famous. Those who became famous—and remain so today—because of their work for rich patrons include Leonardo Da Vinci (1452–1519), Michelangelo (1475–1564), Raphael (1483–1520) and Botticelli (1445–1510). The result, notes Braudy, “was an unprecedented propaganda of images for both patron and artist to trumpet their importance.”<sup>32</sup> The prevalence of the painted portrait, and later printed, photographic, and digitally reproduced versions, helped to establish visual self-representation as a critical mode for communicating one’s public value and identity.

Portraits served as status symbols, affirming the power of those represented, even depicting them as having historical importance; in Italian Renaissance painting, lords and ladies might be painted within notable scenes, or alongside famous figures. The characteristics of the portrait—the posed subject, carefully selected background setting, and efforts to represent the subject’s internal character in addition to his or her physical appearance and possessions—are tropes that have shaped the nature of self-representation through to the present day. Specific (and often idealized) postures, expressions, and gestures were depicted alongside props and other items signifying particular elements of the subject’s identity, class, or station. Some of these portraits, like photographs of celebrities today, provided models for how to dress, how to hold one’s body, and what were the most elegant gestures and poses.

With the invention of the printing press in the late 1400s, and the more widespread use of engraving in the next century, portraits could proliferate and circulate in even greater detail. We think of competition over publicity as being relatively recent, but, as Braudy notes, the “competition of images we blindly associate with the present had already by the sixteenth century begun in earnest. It was a new world of fame in which visible and theatrical fame would become the standard, and public prominence a continual theme.”<sup>33</sup> Certain rulers, notably England’s Elizabeth I and France’s Louis XIV, appreciated the power of

printing and engraving to spread their fame and authority over great distances. Both of them directed their scribes and artists to create written and visual materials in the service of self-promotion. Elizabeth I's persona was carefully crafted to embody a unified, imperial England, a "combined cult of herself and her country." Louis XIV, who launched a premeditated program to have himself celebrated as the Sun King, was described by one aristocrat this way: "If he was not the greatest king, he was the best actor of majesty at least that ever filled a throne." The king told his official historians that "the most precious things in the world to me" was "my glory."<sup>34</sup> By the late eighteenth century, with the conversion of the Louvre palace into a museum, and then the establishment of national portrait collections, such as the English National Portrait Gallery in 1856, there were now even more monumental yet accessible public spaces for the archive and display of influential individuals.

Over time, the practice of sitting for one's portrait became commonplace even outside of elite circles. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century, to have one's portrait made was a sign of bourgeois success; it became possible for the middle class to emulate the stoic, reverent postures of high society. The portrait also worked to highlight the unique qualities of esteemed and respected individuals who had made discoveries or contributed to culture. Portraits of scholars, authors, inventors, composers, and political thinkers celebrated the unique quality of the individual, elevating these often middle-class persons, who also gained celebrity thanks to their efforts and talents. Meanwhile, some royals and institutional leaders began to present themselves more casually and portraits evolved from the formal and staged to the personal and domestic, complete with pets and familiar possessions. Some eighteenth-century portraits of Marie Antoinette, for instance, emphasized her role as mother, picturing her in a relaxed, domestic setting, accompanied by her children.<sup>35</sup> While the common folk used portraits to emulate the elite, some royals presented themselves as important, yet approachable, a critical suggestion for rulers like Antoinette, who was largely viewed as extravagant and unsympathetic. Her efforts at image management especially backfired when she dressed up as a shepherdess or milkmaid at her simulated farm on the opulent Palace Versailles, an extravagantly wealthy royal playing at and seeming to mock the poor.

By the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the growth of a nonaristocratic and increasingly influential bourgeoisie whose economic and political fortunes were affected by royal policies began to be less deferential to and more critical of that power. And just as the new technologies of printing could be used to bolster royal authority, these new media could also be used to criticize and even undermine that power.

Indeed, this can be seen as the beginning of celebrity gossip. In France, by the mid-1700s, “a vast underground literature attacking the prerogatives and pretensions of monarchs, aristocrats, and the church had emerged” that was circulated by an increasingly assertive bourgeoisie and written in a style that “anticipated the gossip columnists of the yellow press.” One such exposé was *The Private Life of Louis XV*, a *chroniques scandaleuse*, a diatribe against the corruption and decadent behavior of the nobility.<sup>36</sup> By the late 1700s, such printed gossip challenging the authority and the personas of elites had spread to England, other European counties, and the American colonies.

Jürgen Habermas famously theorized this period as a critical moment in cultural history, in which society shifts from a top-down representational culture, where influence based on edicts and imagery was hierarchically disseminated from the elite few to the masses, to a critical, participatory culture in which ordinary citizens could be informed about, and participate in, discussions regarding matters of public concern.<sup>37</sup> Here, we see that it is not the official histories, the gilded Bibles, or even the elite newspapers of the day that were most influential, but rather the cheap broadside posters, pamphlets, and street literature—what Leslie Shepard calls “the ephemera of the masses”—that transformed social relations by widening the scope of public discourse.<sup>38</sup> With the spread of print, and the rising literacy rates that followed, Habermas saw the emergence of the “bourgeois public sphere,” a realm apart from the state that thrived in coffeehouses, taverns, and salons, where individuals—at this time primarily propertied, educated men—could debate issues of public concern and challenge state authority. Thus certain individuals were transformed from a position of passive deference to the social order into active participants in public culture. As Habermas argues, the idea of the democratic society rests on the model of the political public sphere. The public sphere in turn is dependent on

the *fourth estate*, the press that acts as a watchdog, fostering an informed and empowered public. It is the informed public that is thereby able to hold those in power accountable.

Of course there was never just one public sphere, but various counterpublics that especially grew in size and influence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rise of these public spheres, especially in cities, and sustained by the explosive growth of newspapers in the 1700s and 1800s, had a powerful effect on how traditional elites were regarded. And it was especially in the nineteenth century in the United States that we see how this historic shift, and the rise of an increasingly commercialized and consumer culture, that enabled nonelites to gain visibility, furthered the shift from fame to celebrity. Increasingly public figures “owed more to their visibility and ability to attract publicity than to their achievements or pedigree.”<sup>39</sup>

From tombs and coins to statues and portraits, all of these monuments and objects preserved one’s image, and in some cases their fame, long after they had died. One classic example of how fame can span millennia is the notoriety of King Tutankhamun, the boy pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty of ancient Egypt, born around 1341 BC. King Tut, as he came to be known, became pharaoh at the age of eight after the disastrous rule of his predecessor Akhenaten. Akhenaten had violated various rituals and practices sacred to the Egyptians, and Tut, relying on excellent advisors, restored the previous practices and became a symbol of this restoration to “the proper order of things.”<sup>40</sup> Beyond this, his reign was not particularly notable.<sup>41</sup> When he died at the age of eighteen, he was buried in the Valley of the Kings, his tomb filled with murals depicting his journey to the afterworld and various artifacts, including precious jewelry, statues, and toys from his childhood.

In the nineteenth century, wealthy Europeans began to explore and excavate various ancient sites, hoping to find artifacts for their homes or to place in museums. One aristocrat, Lord Carnarvon, fascinated by Egyptology, funded the work of the archeologist Howard Carter who was looking for tombs of the royals and upper classes. Just as Carnarvon—who had been funding Carter since 1907—was about to pull the plug, Carter and his workmen, in November 1922, discovered an opening to a descending stairway leading to an underground tomb. They eventually got to a door with Tutankhamun’s name on it and broke through it.

There they were stunned to find a nearly perfectly intact tomb, which included almost 5,400 objects the pharaoh might need in the next life, from perfumes and oils to sandals and linen underwear to his solid gold coffin.<sup>42</sup>

The discovery of an untouched 3,000-year-old tomb was an international sensation that sparked further fascination with ancient Egypt; it took Carter ten years to catalog all the treasures, which eventually went to the Egyptian Museum of Cairo. It also inspired what came to be called a wave of “Tut-mania,” with newspapers vying for stories and scoops about Tut, the tomb, and, especially, the alleged “Pharaoh’s Curse,” meaning death for anyone who invaded or disturbed a pharaoh’s tomb.<sup>43</sup> Egyptian motifs became popular on clothes, jewelry, and in Art Deco architecture; a fruit company featured King Tut brand lemons; President Herbert Hoover named his dog King Tut. Carter and Carnarvon (along with Tut) became instant celebrities; the American magician Charles Carter rebranded himself as Carter the Great. A 1923 record, “Old King Tut,” became a hit.<sup>44</sup>

Fifty years later, in 1976, the blockbuster museum exhibit *The Treasures of Tutankhamun* became an American obsession, touring the country for three years; it was the most popular museum show in U.S. history.<sup>45</sup> As the Associated Press reported, “People waited in lines for nine hours to see it during its first stop two years ago in Washington. In Chicago, crowds gathered at 10 the night before the show opened.” The *Los Angeles Times* called the phenomenon a “King Tut binge” and said museum attendees were like “a human tidal wave.”<sup>46</sup> The *New York Times* estimated that at least 400 manufacturers were producing Tut-inspired products, including whiskey bottles in the shape of Tut’s death mask.<sup>47</sup> By April 1978, the comedian Steve Martin appeared on *Saturday Night Live* in a pharaoh’s costume singing his instantly hilarious and famous song “King Tut,” which contained the lyrics “Now when he was a young man / He never thought he’d see / People stand in line to see the boy king” and “Now, if I’d known / They’d line up just to see you / I’d trade in all my money / And bought me a museum.” He ended with “He gave his life for tourism.”

Why this fascination with a pharaoh from over 3,000 years ago? Why did he become an unwitting celebrity? Because so many tombs of the pharaohs had been looted, to find one so complete and untouched was

unique and thrilling. And, in part, it was all of the surviving possessions, the gold, the jewels, the statues, as opposed to any singular accomplishments in his life, which made him a twentieth-century star. But the tomb was also a window into what was believed to be the first great civilization, and it was the use of mummification and the myth of the pharaoh's curse that tied Tut and ancient Egypt to the supernatural, the occult. His tomb, with all of the clothing, food, and the like that were to accompany him into a fervently believed in afterlife, tap into our fascination with and fears about death and fantasies of immortality. All this physical evidence of a faith in an afterlife, and then everyday people seeing someone who died 3,000 years before but is now newly known, did mean Tut now mattered to posterity, was not fully gone at all. As humans grapple with the meaning of life, with the "why are we here" question, seeing evidence of those who came before us, what they made, how they lived and what they believed connects us to a sense of origins. Tut and ancient Egypt were, to twentieth-century Brits and Americans, exotic, different. Yet he was an emblem of the persistence of human striving, and of the faith in eternal life.

Do our lives matter? Does what we do matter after we're gone? By the twentieth century, the rise of secularization and a waning belief, for some, in an afterlife, "bred a twin obsession with posterity and death."<sup>48</sup> Celebrity—to be known by millions, to be mourned when you go, to live on in the hearts and minds of people—tied the new mechanisms and technologies of fame production with that age-old longing for everlasting life.

### Celebrity and Aura

If remote, unknowable, but famous royalty had an aura about them that stemmed in fact from their being so rare, so distinctive, so elevated from everyday people, what has omnipresent, intensified visibility done to the aura of the famous? In the mid-1930s, the social critic Walter Benjamin wrote an essay entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in which he argued that technological innovation, especially with the rise of "mass culture," led to a shift in the nature and value of art, and his argument applies to how mass-produced visuality may have affected the shift from fame to celebrity. Early art, he argued, was

one of a kind, embedded in specific locations and rituals, and because a painting or sculpting was not identically reproducible, it had an aura. Think, for example, of the aura surrounding the *Mona Lisa*. Part of the aura, embedded in it, was knowledge of the artwork's particular historical uses and its ownership over time. This aura imbues the work with authenticity; the one-of-a-kind painting, for example, was distinguished by its uniqueness and its remoteness from daily life. Benjamin contended that the *aura* of the art object has been destroyed by widespread reproduction—we can all get prints of the *Mona Lisa* if we want—in that the process of duplicating an artwork effaces the uniqueness of the object and its distance from the viewer.

In a museum, for instance, works are presented as individual, distinctive, and therefore special; they are secured within the halls of the institution, sometimes even behind glass, and we can't own or even touch them. Elevated as singular works of inaccessible beauty that we are meant to admire, even worship, they retain their aura. Benjamin argues that new technologies, including lithography and print, but especially photography, allow artworks to be widely copied and distributed, thus shattering the aura, challenging the notion of the one-of-a-kind and authentic work, and shifting focus away from the object's symbolic value by reinstituting the work back into everyday life, where it can be acquired and used by anyone and thus brought closer to the masses. The process of reproduction, then, results in the democratization of art, an effect that Benjamin sees as politically useful, even progressive. Thus, as media scholar Paddy Scannell notes, "New forms of mass communication may transform consumers into active participants and therein lays a new relationship between producers, products, and audiences. Not the worship of the author (as genius) or of the work (as truth and beauty) by an adoring audience, but a more equal and collaborative relationship in which the author aligns himself with the audience (the masses), takes their point of view, and gives it expression in his work."<sup>49</sup>

In the decades that accompanied and followed the Industrial Revolution, rapidly changing technologies meant that artistic modes of self-representation were quickly expanding. Advances in printing, etching, and, later, photography allowed anyone with a relatively small amount of money to record and distribute a likeness. As a result, a greater number of people could become recognizable, their images and stories disbursed,

which meant that it was no longer only the wealthy and powerful who could hope for attention or renown. At the same time, photographic reproductions allowed the public access to the images of the elite and influential, thus erasing the feeling of distance between the famous “them” and the rest of us. So while Benjamin argued that technological advancements allowed for the democratization of art, these developments also shaped the nature of fame. As self-representation became less dependent on large and expensive artistic processes like sculpture and oil painting, the aura of the famous figure—his or her uniqueness as a public person at a distance or remove from the rest of society—was thereby diminished. Fame, and the famous, appeared more accessible. Meanwhile, newspapers and photography gave the public a greater sense of access to, and influence over, well-known figures. It is this evolution that we trace in the pages ahead.

### Overview of the Book

*Celebrity* thus provides an overview account of the history of stardom, its dynamic relationship with technologies of mass communication, and the academic theories that have emerged to help explain the production, circulation, and effects of celebrity culture. We offer a brief history of fame, and the historical modes of celebrity production, and how they have changed (and persisted) over time. We cannot possibly discuss everyone who became a celebrity since the nineteenth century, so we have sought to focus on certain exemplars of different types of fame and stardom. A central aspect of the history of fame is, in Braudy’s words, the “changing ways by which individuals have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others and, not incidentally, have thereby gained power over them.” From the beginning, “fame has required publicity,”<sup>50</sup> the forms of which have also both persisted and evolved. Within this narrative, we uncover the relationship between fame, politics, fandom, and economic and discursive power.

The exponential speed in which technologies have developed throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has prompted significant changes in the role celebrities play in society, and in the ways audiences engage and interact with them. It is through our interaction with famous figures via these mediated encounters that they come to

hold meaning and value, for us and for our culture. We will emphasize the central role of the media and communications technologies and their particular affordances, to the manufacture, proliferation, and democratization of fame and celebrity. So we take a closer look at the development of media technologies, from newspapers, photography, and early fan magazines through to radio and television and including contemporary digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, in order to understand how each new advance in media molds the meaning of celebrity within popular culture at that particular historical moment. We will also consider how these evolving technologies interact with, shape, and are shaped by the changing industrial conditions around the production of fame.

While many elements of celebrity—who becomes one and why, how it is produced—have remained surprisingly constant over the years, it is also crucial to pay attention to how historical context shapes visibility and stardom. Evolving attitudes about race, gender, appropriate public behavior, sex and sexuality, and about authority and power all contribute to who does and does not gain celebrity status in different historical eras. What has been condemned as celebrity behavior in one era—say, having a child out of wedlock—barely raises an eyebrow in another.

Celebrity culture is a huge and profitable industry in the United States. It also plays a major role in constituting who we are, and what we hope for and dream about. And celebrity culture has a history. However evanescent and trivial particular celebrities and their triumphs and tragedies may be over the years, this media juggernaut, and what lies in its wake, is not immaterial. We need to appreciate its evolution, its industrial production, and its multiple effects, especially now, when celebrity culture has its grip on nearly every aspect of American life.