**Celebrity**

celebrity (n.)

late 14c., "solemn rite or ceremony," from Old French celebrité "celebration" or directly from Latin celibritatem (nominative celebritas) "multitude, fame," from celeber "frequented, populous" (see celebrate). Meaning "condition of being famous" is from c.1600; that of "famous person" is from 1849.

When the old gods withdraw, the empty thrones cry out for a successor, and with good management, or even without management, almost any perishable bag of bones may be hoisted into the vacant seat. [E.R. Dodds, "The Greeks and the Irrational"]

*From* [*http://www.etymonline.com/index.php*](http://www.etymonline.com/index.php)

**"The Meaning of Celebrity"**

**By Barbara Goldsmith**

At a recent Manhattan dinner party, the celebrity guests included a United States Senator, an embezzler, a woman rumored to spend $60,000 a year on flowers, a talk-show host, the chief executive officer of one of America’s largest corporations, a writer who had settled a plagiarism suit and a Nobel laureate.

The line between fame and notoriety has been erased. Today we are faced with a vast confusing jumble of celebrities: the talented and untalented, heroes and villains, people of accomplishment and those who have accomplished nothing at all, the criteria for their celebrity being that their images encapsulate some form of the American Dream, that they give enough of an appearance of leadership, heroism, wealth, success, danger, glamour and excitement to feed our fantasies. We no longer demand reality, only that which is real seeming.

Our age is not one in which the emperor’s golden nightingale is exposed as valueless when the true pure voice of the real bird pours forth, but one in which the synthetic product has become so seductive and malleable that we no longer care to distinguish one from the other.

Synthetic celebrities are our own creation, the modern equivalent of biblical graven images. In bowing down to them, we absent ourselves from the everyday ethical and moral judgments that insure the health of a society.

We cling to outmoded standards in according these fabricated celebrities all the substantial rewards we once reserved for those who deserved our adulation: social acceptance, head-of-the-line access, public acclaim, monetary gains and the ability to influence the power structures and institutions of our nation.

In rewarding these individuals, our society often exempts them from hard moral rules and equal justice.

When the film executive Robert Evans was convicted of cocaine use, his sentence was to create a program to deter young people from using drugs. When the Hollywood studio head David Begelman pleaded no contest to the charges of embezzling funds from Columbia Pictures, he was ordered to continue his psychiatric care. When the international celebrity art dealer Frank Lloyd was convicted of falsifying his books on the purchase and sale prices of the late Mark Rothko’s paintings, thereby defrauding Rothko’s two children millions of dollars, his sentence was to donate $100,000 to the Fund for Public Schools to be used in educating children in art.

Contrast these sentences to the one given William James Rummel for three nonviolent crimes that netted him a total of $230.00—life imprisonment (a judgment upheld by the Supreme Court). Or that of Jerry Helm, also sentenced to life imprisonment (a sentence recently overturned by the Supreme Court) for writing a check for $100 on a nonexistent account.

The rewards of villainy and heroism often prove equal. A decade down the road from Watergate, there have been 169 books written about this affair; they have generated an estimated total of $100 million in profits, much of the money garnered by President Nixon and his men, several of whom were imprisoned for their deeds.

Our inability or lack of concern in questioning the qualifications of people to be celebrated represents an increasingly pernicious phenomenon, for it is axiomatic of a society that we are who we celebrate.

The evolution from reality to image has been relatively rapid. In 1962, the social historian Daniel J. Boorstin alerted Americans to what then seemed a distant threat: “We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so realistic, that they can live in them.” What Boorstin could not have predicted was how the swiftness of our technological achievements, combined with the personal disillusionments of the last two decades, would encourage us to manufacture our fantasies while simultaneously destroying our former role models and ripping away the guideposts of the past. The result is that we have created synthetic celebrities whom we worship, however briefly, because they vicariously act out our noblest or basest desires.

Earlier this century, the proliferation of magazines, newspapers, network radio and Hollywood movies propelled celebrities into prominent positions in the national psyche. Now images can be instantly transmitted across the nation, indeed, the world, sometimes with disastrous results. Marshall McLuhan, the late mass-communications expert, credited television with turning terrorism from an isolated phenomenon into an international spectacle by allowing its parishioners to make free use of electronic facilities to publicize their causes. Political protesters inform the news media of their intentions, then stage demonstrations in front of the cameras. Even intimate tragedies become public events, turning those involved into momentary celebrity performers.

In today’s highly technological world, reality has become a pallid substitute for the image reality we fabricate for ourselves, which in turn intensifies our addiction to the artificial. Anyone who has attended a political convention or a major sporting event knows that watching the proceedings on television, where cameras highlight the most riveting moments, then replay and relate them to similar situations, provides us with more stimulating and complex perceptions than being there does.

Next year’s visitors to the Grand Canyon need not see it. One mile from the boundary will be a $5 million complex where they will be able to view a film of the way the canyon looks during all four seasons and take a simulated raft ride through artificial rapids.

Thomas Hoving, former director of New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, predicts that within the next decade there will be a “quantum leap in the appreciation of art.” By pushing a button in our living room, we will be able to exactly replicate any work of art in any museum in the world.

“Andy Warhol’s Overexposed: A No-Man Show,” will star a $400,000 computerized robot of the artist that has such sophisticated pre-programmed speech that it can hold press conferences and answer questions. In creating his robot, Warhol, who frequently serves as a bellwether of our celebrity society, has simply severed his image from himself, thus defining the ultimate in synthetic celebrity.

“Technology,” wrote the author Max Frisch, “is the knack of so arranging the world that we don’t have to experience it.”

*From* [*http://www.barbaragoldsmith.com/\_the\_meaning\_of\_celebrity\_\_32364.htm*](http://www.barbaragoldsmith.com/_the_meaning_of_celebrity__32364.htm)