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CELEBRITY



Jayne Mansfield, Los Angeles premiere of *The Spirit of Saint Louis*, 1957. Photograph by Michael Ochs.

GILGAMESH TO GAGA

by John Tresch

The Fame Machine,” a brief satire included in French author Auguste de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s collection of 1883, *Cruel Tales*, asks in precise, concrete terms just what celebrity is. Fame—or “*la gloire*” in the original, which means glory and renown, as well as the halo surrounding an image of Christ’s head—is a vague and vaporous notion, a sort of smoke that emanates from truly sublime works and individuals. The narrator

of Villiers’ tale offers the steam engine as proof that elusive and vaporous phenomena can be put to work with very palpable effects. Thus even theatrical success can be reduced to its material components—applause, cheers, stamping feet, sighs, gasps, and well-timed devotional bouquets, as well as the barely stifled guffaw sparking the eruption of laughter and the “wow-ow,” the resonating cascade of bravos launched in close succession.

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Although the claque, or paid troop of applauders, is an unshakable institution in the nineteenth-century Parisian theater, its work, paid for by the performance, is too unpredictable and piecemeal for an age that demands certainty and uniform efficiency.

The hero of the tale, engineer Bathybius Bottom, is an inventor and true devotee of the arts, willing to transform, for a price, any theater into a fame machine. No longer will the success of a play be left to chance or to the incompetence of a hired stooge who might miss his cues, laughing at a tragic turn or cheering the villain. At the flipping of a switch, artificial hands flutter gratifyingly together; the legs of the seats lift and strike the ground in exact imitation of appreciative canes and walking sticks; the cherubim adorning the loges and the proscenium reveal themselves to be no

mere ornament but rather lung-sized bellows calling out their approval of the author and the actors, confirming the artwork's sanctification. The machine also can be directed to plant favorable reviews in the press, and if for some reason a negative response is demanded, it will hiss, boo, and make catcalls. Controlled by an operator who must be above any personal interest, Dr. Bottom's invention transforms the entire theater into a machine for producing glory: a material apparatus that brings about spiritual effects.

More than 120 years later, for audiences familiar with the Kardashian sisters and the

television laugh track, it's easy enough to recognize the target of Villiers' satire and to extend its trajectory forward in time. A great friend of Stéphane Mallarmé and the symbolist poets, Villiers shared Charles Baudelaire's revulsion for the mediocrity of most nineteenth-century art, the formulaic and mechanical aspect of poetry, music, and painting as well as the predictable and entirely

ly automatic back scratching and puffing that filled artistic and literary reviews. In place of aesthetic judgment, Villiers provides a mechanical and commercial procedure, one that plays upon the individual's tendency to follow the responses of the crowd. His satire foreshadows the demagogic propaganda and manipulation of the masses soon analyzed by Gustave le Bon in *The Psychology of Crowds* (1895) and by Sigmund Freud in his *Group Psychology and the*



Louis XIV playing Apollo in *Le Ballet de la Nuit*, by Henry Gisse, c. 1650.

Analysis of the Ego (1921). Such techniques were subsequently programmed into the publicity campaigns and media events supporting the early twentieth century's Hollywood star system. Transposed into the realm of politics, they amplified the fascist political movements in Germany and Italy, which carefully controlled radio, cinema, and massive assemblies to turn the entire nation into a chorus of automated cherubim. The well-organized claque, in a theater or a sports stadium, stimulates the audience member to become part of it; the spectacle of others' admiration persuades the individual to admire.

As satirized by Villiers and practiced by Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini, the manufacture of celebrity may appear to be a distinctively modern phenomenon. Yet long before the technical mastery of steam and electricity, there were fame machines. Societies have always found ways to conjure up and emanate glory, to magnify the power of kings and gods. This machinery has functioned without necessarily entailing oppression, genocide, or war. Common to all human societies, fame machines change form in different epochs and eras, arising out of different cultural demands and technological capacities, giving shape to diverse social imperatives. Looking at some of the material and social arrangements used to produce glory in earlier ages, we may see what twentieth- and twenty-first-century technologies share with the fame machines they built upon and replaced. Fame machines employ a range of materials, cover smaller or larger regions, and may operate with more or less elasticity—commanding awe through threats or summoning devotion through seduction. Yet from the cuneiform inscription of Gilgamesh's quest to the nonstop downloadable masquerade of Lady Gaga, they draw upon the human propensity to admire, to imitate, and to synchronize with our fellows, channeling our attention and emotions toward certain objects and individuals, magnifying them to supernatural proportions.

The archaeological record is made up in large part of bygone fame machines. The greatest kings and gods are those whose systems of amplification were effective enough to travel not only through space but also through time; they are "the greatest" because they're the ones we know: it's the tautology of celebrity (the famous are famous for being famous) discovered at the level of buried and reconstructed artifacts. Stone can be a surprisingly effective choice of material for the issuing of a press release. Ancient Mesopotamians built stone ziggurats to honor and preserve the gods who inhabited them, to store the offerings they demanded, and to house the priests who interpreted their wills. Gods and heroes were

also glorified on stone tablets. One of the still greatest and most famous of these, Gilgamesh, a king of the city-state of Uruk who may have lived around 2,500 years before the birth of Christ, owes his reputation to twelve tablets that date back to the first half of the second millennium BC. His is one of many immortal stories centered on the quest for immortality, an archetype of the heroic quest carved into stone. Already two-thirds divine, Gilgamesh achieved his first blush of celebrity for building thick walls around his city, an accomplishment that didn't deter his taking of liberties with the wives of his subjects. The god Aruru created a rival, the wild man Enkidu, to defeat or at least

Civilization is unbearable, but it is less unbearable at the top.

—Timothy Leary, c. 1970

to distract him; after an epic battle, the two became friends. Seeking "everlasting fame," Gilgamesh sets off to kill the protector of the gods' private cedar grove; he does so, but Enkidu is cursed and dies. Bereft, Gilgamesh goes in search of the secret of true immortality (that is, living forever). Although he eventually reaches the proto-Noah who survived the great Flood, the plant of immortality is stolen and he fails in his quest. He returns, irrevocably mortal, to his home city of Uruk, there to praise those same thick walls that were his earliest claim to fame. These stones, and the story on the stone tablets, are his consolation; his mortality is preserved as legend in place of everlasting life.

New fame machines are built out of the materials of those that precede them. Sargon of Akkad, who forged a Mesopotamian empire of unrivaled extent around 2300 BC, tore down Gilgamesh's stone walls to reconfigure them as the building blocks of his own celebrity. His glory, along with his military and economic influence, extended well beyond the bounds of a single city-state: in his well-coordinated propaganda carved into friezes, walls, and tablets, he appears with the attributes of a god, dragging

the conquered king of Nippur in chains to the city's temple, touting the signs of his mythical origins, recording the boasts of his prowess, proclaiming himself "the king of the four corners of the earth." For ancient celebrities, braggadocio was both a means and an end.

The fame machine assembled by the ancient Egyptians arguably surpassed that of Sargon. Stone, again, was the medium of choice: pillars and obelisks hieroglyphically spelled out the pharaohs' glory in all directions, as did vast and lasting monuments, including the Temple of Karnak and of course the pyramids.

They are trying to make me into a fixed star. I am an irregular planet.

—Martin Luther, c. 1530

The geometric simplicity and sublime scale of these gigantic tombs present incontestable proof of unimaginable quantities of human labor serving the grandeur of a single individual. The doubled meaning of immortality—both everlasting fame and eternal life—applied to these "resurrection machines": they ensured the memory and preserved the bodies of the royal dead. Ironically, we now know the details of the lives, deaths, and afterlives of these kings and queens only because the shrines to preserve their greatness have been desecrated and then resacralized to function within quite different fame machines. Thanks to the movement of his remains through the museums of the world, the pharaoh perhaps best known today is Tutankhamen, the glory of the boy king owing not to any achievement in his lifetime but to the exceptionally well-preserved furnishings of his reputation. Tut's brief reign followed that of Akhenaten, who may have been his father and who attempted to fuse all the glory of the Egyptian gods into one. Why share devotion and glory when it can be concentrated, lenslike, on a single figure? In the city of Amarna, newly royal in 1348 BC, statues and friezes of Ra and Osiris were supplanted with images of the one god, Aten, and naturalistic depictions of his di-

vine son and his queen Nefertiti. After Akhenaten's death, court officials and priests restored the effaced gods and did their best to bury the record of Atenism. The rebooting of the shelved fame machine ensured Tutankhamen's renown in the forms of the traditional religion.

Alexander of Macedonia sought to make the glory of the Egyptians his own. His tutor, Aristotle, wrote in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that happiness can only be decided after one's death; the same is true of greatness. Alexander placed the most illustrious of the cities he created at the Nile delta. Alexandria became the new focal point for the Mediterranean, and the conquest and brief maintenance of a pacified domain made Alexander "the Great." But rather than simply impose the imagery and style of Greek art on subjected people, Alexander grafted his own fame machine onto those already in place: propaganda images remain of Alexander in the guise and adornment of Egyptian and Persian divinities and rulers, fueling the Alexander romances that have been repeated in many tongues. The iconography of Persian magical kingship (including the scepter and the crown) was later adopted in Byzantium and resonates with the Eastern Orthodox concept of the icon, whereby images of holy individuals serve as vessels of divinity for devout observers. A philologist might be able to tell us whether there is a direct connection between these conceptions of supernatural images and two concepts that have given a particular flexibility and intensity to devotional and royal fame machines in Vedic and Hindu traditions: that of the avatar, which reflects the potentially endless ability of gods to appear in different incarnations, and that of darshan, the moment in which a god reveals himself to the sight of an observer, whether in the ritualized setting of a festival or shrine or a mundane setting suddenly and ecstatically rendered transcendent (much like the giddy metamorphosis I once felt at a Ludlow Street café when Ringo Starr walked in unannounced, or the instant electrification of another café in Philadelphia's Italian Market during the primary season of 2008 thanks to Barack Obama's unexpected hand-shaking appearance).

The two concepts combine in the hierophany, or vision of God, seen by Arjuna in book eleven of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

O God! I see within your body the gods, as also all the groups of various beings, and the Lord Brahman seated on his lotus seat, and all the sages and celestial snakes. I see you, who are of countless forms, possessed of many arms, stomachs, mouths, and eyes on all sides. And, O lord of the universe! O you of all forms! I do not see your end or middle or beginning. I see you bearing a coronet and a mace and a discus—a mass of glory, brilliant on all sides, difficult to look at, having on all sides the effulgence of a blazing fire or sun, and indefinable. You are indestructible, the supreme one to be known. You are the highest support of this universe. You are the inexhaustible protector of everlasting piety.

A god embodied in an endless reflecting multiplicity of forms is truly a god capable of a glory “brilliant on all sides”: one whose greatness is spoken and amplified not only by temples

tuned to his vibrational frequencies but by every element of the creation.

The bulk of the fame machines in the ancient and medieval Near East were centered on stone monuments in the imperial capitals. Deliberate in their rejection of these formations, the ancient Israelites devised a machine for making a god that could be easily moved. Unlike the immobile Babylonian ziggurat and Egyptian pyramids, the tabernacle was a portable temple. Yet there was nothing slapdash about its construction, described in great detail in the Book of Exodus. When assembled according to the precise manual God dictates to Moses, in the tent surrounding the Ark containing the stone tablets of the Covenant, “a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” To attain this manifestation, certain zones remain off limits: just as with God’s unspeakable name, so too must Aaron keep out of “the most holy place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark.” Likewise, the injunction against visual representations of either Allah or the Prophet extended the reach

The Hall of Central Harmony, where emperors rested before important ceremonies, Forbidden City, Beijing.

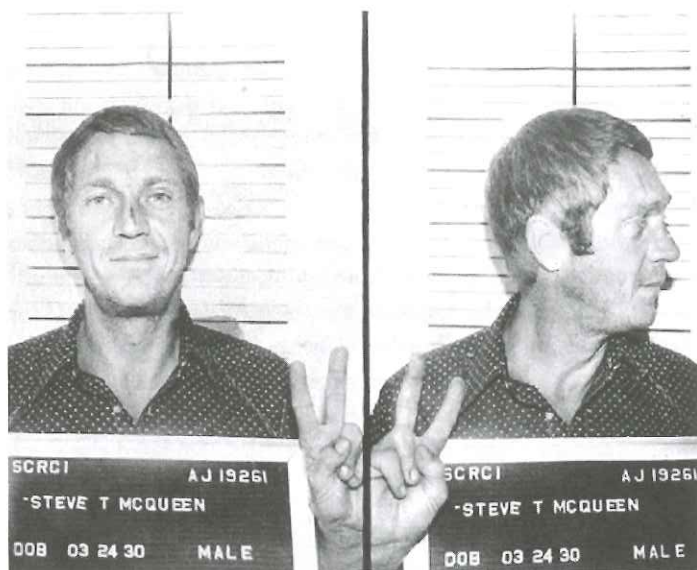


of the Islamic fame machine into regions such as the Arabian peninsula, where statues embodying personified, personalized gods were carried around as markers of tribal identity: above all of these, and replacing them, was the god so great that direct representation was futile. This limitation didn't prevent the celebration and stoking of Allah's magnificence by other means—five-times-daily collective prayer often signaled by the regular call from the minaret, the shared focal point of Mecca,

The nominally monotheistic Catholic Church shifted its emphases to the collecting, copying, and exchanging of manuscripts and to the standardization of ecclesiastical ritual. The calendar of saints was an early star system, albeit different from the one subsequently employed in Hollywood. The closed rites and incantations of the Catholic mass preserve indefinitely the saints' star power—the gift of grace St. Paul called charisma, or the sacred power in objects that the Melanesians called mana—in an eter-

nal monopoly on fame (“the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever”). The approach guarantees the prerogatives of the A-listers, the Trinity, and the Holy Family, but a bit of the glory spills over to illuminate those on the edges of the red carpet, the saints of all occasions and days.

The Protestant Reformation can be seen as a revolution in the Christian fame machine—not just because the printing press decentralized the control of texts away from Rome and from the Latin which



Steve McQueen, mug shot after drunk-driving arrest, Anchorage, Alaska, 1972.

the ubiquitous astrolabe ensuring both temporal and geographical coordination for the faithful, as well as the mandatory pilgrimage. These extraordinarily potent techniques secured and maintained the glory of God across the deserts and seas of the Muslim world.

Likewise the Catholic Church developed techniques for the projection of glory across a wide region. The latter-day apostles built directly upon the fame machine of the Roman empire, whose roads, aqueducts, and coins with portraits worked together to extend the name and power of the emperor; these converged on the Pantheon, an ancient “synergistic” marketing scheme that incorporated the gods of conquered peoples into the collection of the Roman deities to the greater glory of both.

reinforced the Vatican as focal point, but because of the iconoclasm that accompanied the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century religious wars. Icons and idols were banned from inside many churches and monasteries that had previously preserved them, expelled from the ritual shelter that had kept these cults a more or less closed system for a millennium. Despite the best efforts of the Counter Reformation adjuster, Ignatius of Loyola, and his efforts to retool the Catholic machine “for the greater glory of God,” this idol smashing released the accumulated charisma from the churches that had kept them stable, sending them out into the secular world of commerce. In the modern age, sacred charisma can now—must now—animate the traffic in goods and ideas;

it attaches to new and different entities: actors, politicians, artists, writers, and explorers, as well as automobiles and wine bottles. The difference is that these new fame bearers exist in the open, corrosive, and impatient air of the marketplace, which demands with unprecedented insistence that they be replaced when tastes change. They can no longer hide behind the curtain of incense and Latin that kept their precursors from the fickle public.

Intricate and subtle technologies for attaching fame to persons both mortal and divine now serve commodities and their personification in brands. The icons of Andy Warhol [*New York City*, page 106], raised in the Eastern Orthodox church, register the equivalence which modern strategies of public relations, propaganda, and advertising have established between brands (Brillo and Campbell's), entertainers, and politicians. In the marketplace of goods, the cycle of modern celebrity demands constant self-reinvention and rebranding (from Lord Byron [*Albany*, page 167] and Pablo Picasso to Bob Dylan [*Woodstock*, page 68] and Madonna) to maintain the limelight. Another strategy is to claim the status of an unchanging classic, binding oneself to an earlier fame technology, as in Ronald Reagan's cowboy routine, George Clooney's Cary Grant shtick, or the invention by Coca-Cola, Ralph Lauren, and Calvin Klein of a new iconography of American eternity. Warhol's play upon the continually renewed attempt to create, reproduce, and maintain the "classic" echoes through pop culture, in its self-conscious reflections on the glory machine. John Lennon [*Conversations*, page 204], reproached for recognizing that a pop group might be "bigger than Jesus," said that he moved to New York City because if he had lived during the Roman Empire he would have wanted to live in Rome. One of Manhattan's paradoxes—with tragic consequences for Lennon—is that it houses vast engines of global magnification and projection while constantly reducing celebrities to human size. Madonna's early rise was through the sweaty clubs of New York's downtown celebrity industry, but her apotheosis was only confirmed when she drew

materially and immaculately upon the resources of Hollywood and the Vatican.

The new infrastructure of fame that the Internet has put into place simultaneously creates greater decentralization, wider diffusion, and opportunities for vaster, if shorter-lived, concentration. As one recent example (one that is, unfortunately, likely to be evanescent), Lady Gaga openly set out to claim Madonna's mantle, though by occupying and operating a fame machine no longer defined primarily by radio or even by MTV. Her expansion and self-multiplication on magazine covers, gossip sites, talk shows, concert arenas, MP3 downloads, remixes, YouTube, and fansites have

*The love of glory can only create a great hero,
and the contempt of it creates a great man.*

—Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, c. 1830

both asserted and proven that any content or meaning beyond the radio gaga of monstrous or godlike fame is superfluous: existence in the loving lens of the paparazzi trumps any need for essence. The contrast between Lady Gaga's oft-noted ordinary voice and looks and her extraordinary and protean manifestations perfectly suits a system that encourages everyone to build and operate her own fame machine via Facebook, blog, and other additively maintained personal media. If Martin Luther and Johannes Gutenberg made every man and woman a priest, with Gaga and Facebook every user becomes an icon. We must all now pass through a mobile, multifaceted, and omnipresent fame machine to enter even the modest arenas of friendship, family, and work. And we are coaxed—or indeed compelled—to extend our aura, to transform ourselves into diffused, delocalized entities whose power, size, and value we measure out (from the archaic, nondigital shadows) in hit counters and "followers." We make ourselves our own cloud of glory, whose contours and impact are obsessively monitored and adjusted by an increasingly vaporous source.

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