

“EVERYONE WANTS TO BE FAMOUS”

Bruce Willis

“If the gods want to punish you,
they grant you beauty, wealth and fame.”
Richard Gere

“People pay too much attention to actors, and
take them too seriously.”
Kevin Costner

The gods of today call themselves “stars” and their Mount Olympus is Hollywood. Celebrity is the only currency that counts; celebrity luminaries marvelled by the masses. American sociologists have been observing a new and disturbing phenomenon: *Celebrity Worshipping Syndrome* (CWS)—borderline pathological adoration of, and identification with, a Star-God(dess). A person’s whole life is geared toward how the Star behaves, what s/he wears, his/her hairstyle, what the Star is—or, perhaps, what s/he pretends to be. Worshippers will offer up any sacrifice to their star—no effort spared. Of course, this was also true back when Elvis was King. What’s new is that, firstly, it is increasingly older people who are persisting in such pubescent behaviour, and secondly, that the star really does function as a substitute for the Divine, because these fans have nothing else to believe in.

Magazines like *InStyle*, *Celebrity*, *Glamour* etc. thrive solely on featuring stars in a variety of outfits over hundreds of pages, analysing their hairstyles, revealing their make-up secrets and dissecting their wardrobe—all so that the fans can be like the star—albeit with a more modest purse. So Plain Jane can end

up feeling like a star, too, because—so she believes—being a star, in a movie called “Life,” is the sole source of happiness.

“Who would you like to be in the next 24 hours?” asks one advertisement for a watch—and that question captures the essence of today’s zeitgeist. “Being,” long consigned to the fringes with the other wallflowers as just plain “unglamorous,” is upstaged by “The Look,” which makes an entrance under the spotlight every day in something new.

“The whole world is made up of actors;
you spend all day playing comedies.”
Marlon Brando

That’s not as harmless as it sounds. Based on historian Warren Susman’s definition, the Puritan, hard-working culture of the past demanded and respected *character* in a person, an imprint of his moral foundation. By contrast, today’s consumer-based society demands and esteems a *personality* in an individual—an imprint of the traits that he conveys to others. As a consequence, Puritan culture put a particular emphasis on values such as *hard work*, *integrity*, and *courage*. The new cult of personality instead emphasises *charm*, *fascination*, and *a pleasant disposition*. Susman concludes that “the social role demanded by the new personality culture was that of the actor. Every American should be an actor portraying his own self.”

One factor driving this unfortunate development was television. Certain soap operas, to be specific. It would be interesting, some

day, to research the extent to which *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, the cult series from the ’80s, changed popular attitudes, at least for women. Both shows are—no surprise here—products of Hollywood. Both were about extremely rich families that lied and betrayed each other for all they were worth. Scenes (shorter than ever broadcast before) focused on trivial matters without an iota of depth; characters slammed doors instead of bringing an enlightening discussion to a conclusion. These pseudo-dramas consisted of nothing more than hysteria coupled with egocentrism. Basically, each episode featured well-coiffed women, dressed to the nines, daily playing out new roles in the latest fashions. (“Who would you like to be in the next 24 hours?”). Research on the viewers also indicated that the audience was primarily female, and primarily interested in the actresses’ hairstyles and wardrobes.

This was around the same time that *Hennes & Mauritz* (H&M) undertook a global expansion of its operations. The Swedish distributor of affordable fashions specialised in copying the latest trends from the fashion runways in record time, thereby delivering new products to stores almost every week—and at a price that allowed for even the lowest wage-earning women to buy a new outfit and thus play a new role every week. It was around this time that fashion hubs like Paris, Milan and New York started to gain an excessive level of media attention, which is why garish, half-naked clown suits are the only thing paraded down the fashion catwalks anymore, not the kind of thing that the average woman in life could ever wear—unless, of course, she happens to be playing a plum role on the real-life stage of an exclusive jet-set party at the time.

“I have the feeling that if you worry
about yourself too much, you lose yourself.”
Robert Redford

The fashion hype stoked by *Dallas* and *Dynasty* ignited the cult of the supermodel by the end of the ’80s. Women who were too young and clueless to offer anything of substance from within themselves were held up as the brightest stars in the cosmos. (As recently as 2004, the German magazine *Stern* described an interview with ex-supermodel Linda Evangelista as an “attempt to hold a conversation”—because the woman, even at the age of 38, could say nothing worth the paper it was printed on!) Next to a supermodel, even Hollywood stars looked small, chubby and wrinkled (which is occasionally supposed to happen to women over the age of 17). Our hungry eyes could not get enough of the beautiful, leggy, thin creatures, and just looking in the mirror was enough to give



Even the stars themselves imitate the roles played by other stars: Britney Spears emulates her great role model, Madonna, whose fame is based less on her music than on her constant reinvention of herself—or rather, role-playing.



The very successful magazines, 'Glamour' and 'InStyle', offer, almost without exception, articles about clothing and make-up of the stars—and directions on how to imitate. So that every woman—at last!—can feel like a star.

our self-esteem a daily knock-out punch. I remember, when I was a journalist and attended the Paris fashion shows, how I always felt I looked like a miniature blimp, even though I wore a size 36 (US: size 6/7; UK size 8).

From then on, millions of women were obsessed with a single goal: to get as thin as those giraffes on the runway. By starving themselves or purging themselves of everything they just ate. Because a plump duckling has no star-appeal on life's stage—something that even a princess named Diana took to heart.

And when these ladies realised that they still had the same crooked nose, small breasts and sagging derrières, even when they were underweight, did they finally just give it up? No, they went under the knife. Bodies were for sculpting! God gave you the raw materials; it was up to you to add the finishing touches. Breasts were enhanced, tummies tucked, noses straightened, and chins lifted. Finally, the world was ready for the debut of a great star!

So Plain Jane does herself up, blow-dries her hair, patches herself together, and unveils herself in the best rags she can find—and not a soul looks at her. Because isn't she just another bimbo dolled-up like all the other old bags?

"Beauty lies within.
That sounds dreadful to me, but it is true."
Marlene Dietrich

Marlene...whose entire existence was spent fashioning herself into an ivory goddess of Hollywood—cool, delicately refined, and elusive...if she says so, then it must be true. But why did it seem so dreadful to her? Was it because she did not know how to find inner peace and inner happiness, even though she definitely knew which lighting would best show off those high cheekbones of hers, and which stockings would make her famous legs glisten? This is a woman who once complained (no wonder) that she was always in a bad mood, because she hadn't had a good meal to "chow on" for over forty

years—just for the sake of a statuesque figure! The truth is that she had no eyebrows, her nose was like a duck's beak, and she had thin hair. And when corsets, wigs and the pounds of make-up (under the essential perfect lighting) no longer sufficed for her public appearances, she locked herself up in an apartment for the rest of her life, and waited for death to come knocking. Certainly Marlene possessed honourable qualities, maybe foremost among them the nature of a Prussian soldier, but was she ever able to escape from the myth surrounding her? No.

Today, in ever-increasing numbers, normal girls are captivated by the larger-than-life myths from the movie screen or music scene. They give up everything to become more like Britney (who does anything to become more like Madonna), or Shakira, or Christina Aguilera, and all the others like them.

"It is not easy to live with one's looks, but somehow one has to try to forget about them." The person who said this was no hunchback of Notre Dame, but instead one of the most beautiful women of the 20th century, Catherine Deneuve. Ladies, when are you going to finally understand that happiness is just as unlikely to be found in looking perfect as it is in being a celebrity?

Because what all star-wannabes don't know is that fame is a wild beast that no one can tame. You never know if it's going to devour you completely, or creep back into the jungle of oblivion, leaving you standing there, naked and alone. It separates you from others, and from a normal life. Nothing else can guarantee with as much certainty that you will lose yourself—and therefore your purpose in life.

"Actually, I get paid \$100,000 for my work, and \$900,000 for having no private life."
Kevin Costner

Fame renders you a stranger to yourself. Past is the time when stars like Marilyn Monroe or Myrna Loy could not even walk down the street without spending hours beforehand making themselves up *as* Marilyn Monroe or Myrna Loy (Julia Roberts' Clochard-

look comes to mind). Yet, it is still as hard to remain a "normal" person, keeping your core identity intact, if the whole world worships the illusion of you. "Fame took away my sense of identity, and made it difficult for me to find it again only halfway." The person who stated this is himself involved in a vocation of relatively profound expression, where one can create from within oneself, and not just represent: Norman Mailer, the author. "But that's the point of show business," countered Andy Warhol, self-portraitist of his own graces, "to prove that it is not important who you are, but rather what they think you are."

Cast yourself in constantly changing roles—a feat perfected by Madonna, the pop-star chameleon, which has also earned her the highest dividends from her image—and today, of course, Lady Gaga. Nowadays, those who have something to say from experience and perspective are considered less interesting than those who constantly "redefine" or "reinvent" themselves: Magic words for empty shells of human beings who have no identity of their own. "To redefine oneself"—wouldn't it just be enough, simply to *be*—and therefore to be *simple*? But to accomplish this, you would have to shut your eyes and turn inward, be still, and dig deep. You cannot find the real treasures in life at a vanity fair.

Yet this is the tragedy of our time, and it is among the greatest of "crimes" committed by Hollywood against humanity: Glorification of the vacant human being: vain idols only interested in sex, looks, and shoes by Manolo Blahnik—as promoted by the most successful TV series from the last few years, *Sex and the City*. The creation of a Mt. Olympus of false idols who have nothing to say, and have nothing of substance to offer—but are unattainably good-looking. Projecting a mirage as a goal in life: Hardly anyone ever achieves such fame, but when someone does, this fame turns out to be a trap that leads to a real loss of self. Because the tragedy of celebrity is that, over and over again, fame turns on those whom it possesses, and makes them a creature of its own. In the end, stars must accept their lives as prisoners of their own celebrity—or turn their back on fame. "I am capable of anything. Not because I'm mad at others, but rather, because I'm mad at myself. I am never in sync with myself. So I'm the opposite of an egomaniac, but I'm still an asshole." This is French superstar Gérard Depardieu's view of himself, and, he adds: "I have no desire to think...I live my roles." *Ursula Seiler*