



TYLER COWEN

# WHAT PRICE FAME?



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Every man, however hopeless his pretensions may appear, has some project by which he hopes to rise to reputation; some art by which he imagines that the attention of the world will be attracted; some quality, good or bad, which discriminates him from the common herd of mortals, and by which others may be persuaded to love, or compelled to fear him.

—Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, 1751



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# 1

## The Intensity of Fame in Modern Society

Some people desire praise for the mere sake of recognition: Katharine Hepburn once remarked, "When I started out I didn't have any desire to be an actress or to learn how to act. I just wanted to be famous."<sup>1</sup>

Isaac Newton sought acclaim for his achievements in science. He engaged in long and costly battles with Robert Hooke over priority in optics and celestial mechanics, and with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz over the discovery of the differential calculus. Newton expected no money for establishing his originality but he did want recognition of his excellence. He wrote twelve versions of his claim to priority in discovering the calculus and appointed a committee—packed with his supporters—to adjudicate the case.<sup>2</sup>

Other people pursue fame as a means to get money or power or sex, or out of a complex combination of motives. Princess Diana courted the press to have a public counterweight to the royal family, which she perceived as allied against her. The

altruistic, such as Mother Teresa, seek fame to help others through preaching or fund-raising.

For many artists fame complements the value of creative self-expression. Ludwig van Beethoven loved composing music, but he probably would have enjoyed it less if no one ever listened to the product. Many athletes play for the thrill of winning the game, but their enjoyment of the competition feeds on the cheers of the crowd and the sense of achieving a place in sport history. Marcel Proust shut out visitors from his cork-lined room, where he wrote, but he probably expected to be immortalized in the literary canon. Even the most introverted drives and motives are set in a social context and amplified by the potential for achieving fame.<sup>3</sup>

Mark David Chapman, the assassin of John Lennon, told Barbara Walters that "I thought by killing him I would acquire his fame." John Hinckley fired at Ronald Reagan to gain the attention of Jodie Foster. Arthur Bremer shot George Wallace in a quest for recognition, while worrying that his target was not famous enough to guarantee his immortality. Seeking infamy is part pathology, part laziness and lack of talent. For individuals with no moral scruples, infamy can prove the easiest or sometimes only way of getting attention.<sup>4</sup>

Quests for fame influence culture, business, politics, and everyday life. Adam Smith viewed the search for approval as "the end of half the labours of human life." David Hume, in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, wrote of the "love of fame; which rules, with such uncontrolled authority, in all generous minds, and is often the grand object of all their designs and undertakings."<sup>5</sup>

Fame influences the behavior of fans no less powerfully. Many individuals enjoy praising and expressing enthusiasm for

its own sake. They love to cheer, clap, visit monuments, make pilgrimages, give homage, or create laudatory artworks. In essence, fans are consumers, but they are consumers of a special sort. Fans are consumers who pay, at least in part, with praise.

The teenagers behind Beatlemania enjoyed screaming together, storming barricades together, and fainting together. Loving the Beatles *with other people* was more fun than loving them in solitude. Dedicated football fans gather before games and hold cookouts, drink beer, talk sports, hug each other, and catch up on personal news and gossip. Before a game, an NFL stadium parking lot radiates an air of intense bonding and sharing. Fans drive hundreds of miles to partake in these pregame gatherings, which are often a bigger attraction than the game itself. One Green Bay Packer fan said about pregame meetings: "This is all I want in life. It's all I love." The fame of celebrities creates a collective space in which fans share their emotional and aesthetic aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

Some fans are voyeurs at heart. The web site of Jennifer Ringley, an otherwise "ordinary" person, receives 500,000 hits daily. The site consists of scenes from Jennifer's daily life—reading, sleeping, and talking to friends (her sex life is not shown).<sup>7</sup>

Fans use stars as a way of advertising their tastes, distinguishing themselves from others, signaling their cultural standing, and seeking out the like-minded. Fans follow the same performers as their friends, if only to argue about them or to share their favorite moments from a movie or television program. Strangers and business associates use professional sports and celebrities as a comfortable topic of conversation, just as they use the weather. Fans attend conventions to make friends with the like-minded or to look for romance.<sup>8</sup>



Celebrities serve as a medium for political discussion and “education.” Marlon Brando’s support for Indian rights, the opposition of Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) to the Vietnam War, and Jane Fonda’s campaign against nuclear power are known to almost everyone, and have swayed many people. A 1981 study looked at how well Americans knew the political views of six stars: John Wayne, Robert Redford, Joan Baez, Jane Fonda, Dick Gregory, and Marlon Brando. The *lowest* public score was for Robert Redford: “only” 94 percent of the American public could associate him with the political issues he advocated; John Wayne’s figure was 99 percent. Most of these same fans cannot name their representatives in Congress, much less identify their positions. The same study indicated that 80 percent of Americans had discussed the political views of celebrities with their friends. More than half of the 500 adults surveyed said they regarded celebrities as a fair and reliable source of information about public issues. One third admitted that their own views or activities had been shaped by the pronouncements of celebrities.<sup>9</sup>

Fans use stars’ names to identify their preferred styles. Many women have asked their hairdressers for a Princess Di cut, and many men have told corporate fashion consultants that they want to look like Lee Iacocca. Fans have fun speculating on who will be the next Marilyn Monroe. Television personalities, popular musicians, movie stars, fashion models, athletes, and other entertainers have become a commonly shared public experience, especially in the United States.

The obsession with renown extends to the famous themselves. Andy Warhol opined that the best thing about being famous was having the chance to meet other famous people. “Everybody wants to be Cary Grant,” said Cary Grant. “Even I want to be Cary Grant.”<sup>10</sup>

Some fandoms give individuals space to express silly or trivial feelings, while feeling secure within a group. The seventy-five members of the Princess Kitty Fan Club pay homage to Princess Kitty, “the smartest cat in the world,” who can (supposedly) play the piano, slam-dunk a basketball, count, and jump hurdles. The Mr. Ed fan club, named after the talking horse of television fame, has a thousand members and lists “betterment of the world” as its goal.<sup>11</sup>

British football fans use fandom to vent aggression and racism and to exercise a sense of power. Young fans attend away games to get out of town and enjoy a day away from their parents. In many competitions the two groups of fans wear different colors, have different accents, and identify with different local cultures. They scream at each other, exchange racial epithets, and, in some cases, incite fights. Sports teams and leagues cultivate rivalries to help their fans feel different or special, to give their fans something to dislike, or to help fans indulge in vicarious vendettas and power plays.<sup>12</sup>

Fandom often involves collective hostility toward stars, rather than unalloyed worship and approval. The pianist Glenn Gould, who gave up concertizing, described the audience as a hostile force whose “primal instinct was for gladiatorial combat.” Presidents, athletes, movie stars, singers, and members of the British royal family are criticized by millions every day. Joey West published the *I Hate Madonna Jokebook*. The *Washington Post* ran a contest that encouraged readers to concoct humorous and elegant put-downs of celebrities. The Internet has led to a proliferation of celebrity “death pools,” such as the Ghoul Pool, where people bet which famous individuals will die next. Fred and Judy Vermoral, in their study of fandom, noted: “we were astonished by the degree of hostility

and aggression, spoken and unspoken, shown by fans towards stars. Later we realized this was one necessary consequence of such unconsummated, unconsumable passion."<sup>13</sup>

Fans take pleasure in judging presidents, leaders, and famous entertainers by especially harsh and oversimplified standards. In the realm of the stars prejudice is given free reign to rule opinion. Fans can let off critical steam, or express vicarious love, without fear of repercussions, and without having to confront the complexity of the moral issues involved. Jonathan Swift noted that "Censure is the Tax a Man pays to the Publick for being eminent."<sup>14</sup>

Fans use stars to play out their illusions, to distract themselves from daily life, and to express their emotions. The outpouring of sympathy on the death of Princess Diana raises the question of whether and why so many people really cared. To what extent was the outpouring of grief for Diana a cloaked expression of misery in the mourners' own lives or a vicarious release of frustrations? Tinseltown Studios, in Anaheim, California, charges customers \$45 for the privilege of being treated as a star; the employees act as cheering crowds and pursuing paparazzi.<sup>15</sup>

A forty-two-year old woman remarked about Barry Manilow: "I suppose it's the same kind of thing people get out of religion. I can't really explain it more than that. But they obviously get something from God to help them through their lives. And Barry is—maybe I shouldn't say it, but it's the way I feel—he's the same sort of thing. He helps me through my life." This same woman claims she thinks of Barry while making love to her husband, only to cry afterward when she realizes that Barry is not there. Another fan refuses to sleep with her husband altogether, ostensibly on the grounds that her husband is not Barry

Manilow. Another fan, named Jane, said, "I think if a nuclear war did happen I'd be thinking: Is Boy George safe?"<sup>16</sup>

In short, ours is a culture steeped in fame. Modern talk show hosts, such as Oprah Winfrey, have daily audiences ranging from 10 to 20 million people. The Barbara Walters interview with Monica Lewinsky was watched by over 70 million Americans, a record for a news program, if it may be called that. Graceland draws more visitors per year—750,000—than does the White House. Boris Yeltsin, when he visited America, asked as he stepped off the plane: "Do you think O. J. did it?" Michael Jordan, the subject of seventy books and one of the most widely recognized figures in the world, is an industry unto himself. In 1998 *Fortune* magazine estimated his career net economic impact at \$10 billion.<sup>17</sup>

In the United States there are over 3,000 Halls of Fame. Since the Hall of Fame for Great Americans was initiated in 1901, Halls have been developed for baseball players, rock-and-roll stars, accountants, dog mushers, marbles champions, shuffle board players, pickle-packers, and police officers. Bowlers alone have thirty Halls of Fame for their sport.<sup>18</sup>

Fame has multiplied in virtually all endeavors and has taken on many new forms, of which celebrity is only one manifestation. We have famous musicians, artists, writers, designers, architects, scientists, inventors, charitable benefactors, cooks, critics, fashion models, CEOs, and even economists. Although top scientists cannot compete with Harrison Ford for widespread visibility, they receive recognition from newspapers, scientific journals, peers and colleagues, graduate students, the next generation of scientists, and, occasionally, the general public. "High culture fame" and "low culture fame" have grown together.

Fame-seeking, celebrity, and fandom are deeply rooted psychological phenomena, existing in most societies, but they are amplified and facilitated by commercial market economies and modern technologies. The modern American notions of fame and celebrity date from the 1920s and 1930s, when radio, the recording industry, and motion pictures gave stars an unparalleled ability to reach wide audiences. Today, television, the compact disk, and the Internet give fans further assistance in finding, following, and enjoying their stars from a distance.

Fame has become the ideological and intellectual fabric of modern capitalism. Ours is an economy of fame. Our culture is about the commodification of the individual and the individual image.

#### **FAME VERSUS MERIT**

As we will see in later chapters, a market economy separates fame from merit in at least three regards. First, although the fame of some stars is good for society, the fame of others is bad. Fans do not always choose the stars whose fame brings the greatest social benefit.

Second, fans do not always get the stars they want. Fame markets sometimes malfunction, even if we take fan preferences as the standard of merit. The “herd behavior” of crowds may cause stars to rise and fall with excess rapidity. Fans may not be able to coordinate around the stars they truly desire, as I will explain in the next chapter. Or partisans may “overcrowd” fanships, causing less than enough privacy for stars and damaging their creativity.

Third, the famous often fall short of desirable moral and aesthetic standards. Many “heroes” are unadmirable, excessively sensationalistic, or simply boring and untalented. In other

cases, the most famous creator in an area may be an admirable and talented producer, but simply not the best of his or her genre. Is the super-famous Andrew Wyeth really better than Jasper Johns or Roy Lichtenstein?

I do not seek to debate who are the best painters, or even whether there is an objective answer to that question. I therefore give two value-free interpretations to this third separation of fame and merit. Under the first interpretation, the distribution of fame will not correspond to *any* prevailing conceptions of aesthetic merit. Partisans of realism and partisans of abstract art will, for instance, both believe that fame and merit are separated. Under the second interpretation, fame will not match the consensus of experts about quality in a given area. If those experts were to try to control the fame-generating process, economic constraints would not allow them to promote reputations in proper proportion to merit.

The separation of fame and merit is a central dilemma for any evaluation of a modern market economy. A system based on voluntary exchange does not reward merit with a concomitant degree of recognition. To assess this reality, I step back and ask some fundamental questions about how fame is produced. Specifically, why are fame and merit so frequently separated? What principles govern who becomes famous and why? Does fame-seeking behavior provide an invisible hand that harmonizes individual and social interests, or do fame markets corrupt social discourse and degrade our culture? Most centrally, what are the implications of modern fame for creativity, privacy, and morality?

## PLATO AND THE REPUBLIC OF DECEPTION

The writings of Plato, who virulently opposed the idea of a competitive market in praise, provide the foil for this book. In

the dialogues *Protagoras*, *Crito*, *Ion*, *Phaedrus*, and the *Republic*, Socrates attacks individuals who teach and praise for pay—the Sophists—and criticizes praise aimed at entertaining the general public.

Book 11 of Homer's *Odyssey* disturbed Plato. Odysseus meets heroes, such as Achilles, leading a dark and gloomy existence in the underworld, despite their brave and meritorious deeds on earth. Plato's Myth of Er, presented in book 10 of the *Republic*, rewrites this tale with a different ending. When Er travels to the underworld he meets contented heroes and tortured villains. Plato, who used the underworld as a moral parable of punishment and reward, disapproved of how Homer used it to tell a story.

Contrary to Homer, Plato rejected the idea of a competitive praise economy and called for the banishment of the poets, the traditional conduit for Greek praise. Poets praise heroes to entertain their audiences, rather than to offer the appropriate rewards for great deeds. As a result, poets fail to instruct because they must imitate the tastes of their audience to keep their listeners. Philosopher-Kings, Plato's wise and benevolent rulers, will serve as the gatekeepers: "Only so much of poetry as is hymns to gods or celebration of good men should be admitted into a city."<sup>19</sup>

Plato's works are (among other things) an attempt to reform an economy of praise and to restore the link between language and truth. Although most modern commentators reject Plato's belief in comprehensive censorship, the Platonic critique of a free market in praise and fame continues to prove influential, from left-wing thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas to neo-conservatives such as Allan Bloom.

I seek to revise Plato by providing an alternative vision, emphasizing how market-produced praise sparks creativity

and achievement. Despite the considerable imperfections of a market in renown, my view of commercialized fame is largely an optimistic one. Markets increase the supply of star performances and the supply of fame with remarkable facility. The offer of praise is a relatively inexpensive means of payment; fame is a “cheap date” for the fans. We use fame to reward and control stars, thus drawing forth a dazzling array of diverse and creative performances. Fame mobilizes the human propensity to talk in support of great achievements.

Ironically, the famous themselves may be the most likely to lose from fame-generating institutions. Socially beneficial fame-seeking often harms the achiever. The famous live under stress and many die young. The quest for approval sometimes becomes a weakness or an addiction, rather than a means of achieving satisfaction. Bernard Mandeville’s theme of private vices, public benefits thus can be converted into a tale that Mandeville’s opponents would have found morally fitting. The selfish behavior of fame-seekers rebounds to the benefit of society but often gives the fame-seekers little in return. Fame-seekers are often the biggest losers precisely when they appear to reap the largest gains.<sup>20</sup>

A fame-intensive society is a society full of illusions, but deception is an important part of creativity, whether the deceptions be in the mind of the creator or in the mind of the audience. In an earlier book, *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, I portrayed the vitality of the market’s influence on contemporary music, art, and literature. I presented the capitalist market economy as a vital framework for supporting a plurality of artistic visions, providing new and satisfying creations, helping consumers and artists refine their tastes, and paying homage to the past by reproduction and dissemination.



At the same time, however, critics support the philosophy of cultural pessimism, which tells us that contemporary culture is failing or in decline. Only the market can support so much successful and diverse carping. Cultural pessimism is itself an illusion that comes from the successful proliferation of creativity. Art cannot be expected to mirror truth, and criticism, as a form of creative art, will not necessarily reflect the truth either. The actions of fans, stars, and critics, taken collectively, create a culture of idol, myth, and make-believe.

This book on fame continues the theme put forth in the commercial culture book that successful societies are full of false beliefs. The widespread production of fame requires that ideas and images are distributed by the market in accord with their private profitability rather than their social use. Plato was correct in believing that the market in ideas would not produce "Truth" with a capital T, but he did not recognize that competing illusions could prove superior to centrally enforced Truth.

Ironically, Plato was himself a primary practitioner of mimesis and illusion, despite his frequent criticisms of those very principles. Plato advances images, narratives, and moral tales to make his own principles more persuasive. The tale of the shadows in the cave in the *Republic* stands as a metaphor for Plato's view of elusive truth. In Plato's parable, man is likened to a cave dweller who spends his time viewing shadows, rather than perceiving the world accurately. Individuals are blinded by the sun, Plato's metaphorical symbol for the truth, when they step outside the cave. The philosopher should strive to make man aware of the sun, so that truth may be served.

Plato was adept at manipulating images to hold our attention and entertain us. He is the lead Sophist of them all and he offers us another set of illusions and metaphors. The tale of the