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Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture

Celebrity Culture as a Status System

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C elebrities have been analyzed from a number of viewpoints. In addition to the multitude of journalistic accounts, scholars have considered celebrities from the perspectives of history, cultural criticism, power elites, contemporary politics, cultural sociology, religion, and cultural studies.[1] Nearly all of these discussions at least allude to the fact that celebrities are part of a status or prestige system. While some draw parallels between celebrities and other kinds of phenomena, no one systematically relates celebrities and celebrity culture to a more general analysis of status systems. That is the purpose of this essay. A key aspect of this task will be to indicate how contemporary celebrity culture is similar to or different from other status systems.

Status is the accumulated approvals and disapprovals that people express toward an actor or an object. The theory of status relations attempts to explain the key features of social relationships when status is a central resource and is significantly insulated from, and hence not reducible to, economic and political power. Of course, a pure status system, like a perfectly competitive market or a perfect vacuum, does not exist in the historical world. It is, however, a useful analytical concept for analyzing and comparing actual cases. Just as the relationships between supply, demand, and price are most easily seen in highly competitive markets, the patterns of behavior in status systems are easiest to detect and explain when status is relatively independent from economic and political power. The Indian caste system and teenage status systems are historic examples of such systems that I have analyzed extensively in previous works,

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developing a general theory of status relations to explain the patterns that have been observed.[2] I draw on these analyses briefly to illustrate the logic of this theory. While celebrity culture is less insulated from economic and political influences, it still has many features that are characteristic of classic status systems, which I will explore. To do this, I must first introduce, in summary fashion, my theory of status relations and its four key elements.

Theory of Status Relations

First, status is relatively *inalienable*. It is "located" primarily in other peoples' minds. Hence, in contrast to wealth or political position, it cannot be appropriated. Conquerors or robbers may be able to take away your economic resources, but to change your status they have to change the opinions of other people. This is possible, but much more difficult than simple appropriation. Those with new wealth or new political power nearly always attempt to convert some of these resources into status—in order to give them greater security and legitimacy. But the inalienability of status also means other kinds of resources are not easily converted into status in the short-run. Exchanges are usually implicit; if people are openly paid or rewarded to give you acclaim and companionship, others discount such praise and association. Such explicit exchanges may even lower your status. Only time and subtlety convert riches into status. Typically, a generation is needed for the newly wealthy to be accepted by the old elite. Inalienability helps protect the status of those at the top and to perpetuate the negative status and stigma of those at the bottom. New wealth does not make you a Brahman in Bombay or Boston. Teenagers report that it is very difficult to change their status or their crowd after the first year or so in high school. Ex-convicts rarely escape the stigma of their past. In sum, once status systems and ranks become institutionalized, they are relatively stable. As we shall see, celebrity status is less inalienable, but even there well-established stars are less

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1 See the following for examples of books written from the perspective of history: Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (New York: Vintage,1997); of cultural criticism: Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Vintage, 1992) and Richard Schickel, *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (New York: Doubleday, 1985); of power elites: Francesco Albertoni, "The Powerless Elite: Theory and Sociological Research on the Power of the Stars," *Sociology of Mass Communications*, ed. Dennis McQuail (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1972); of contemporary politics: Darrell M. West and John Orman, *Celebrity Politics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 2002) and Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House* (Bolder: Westview, 2004); of cultural sociology: Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); of religion: John Frow, "Is Elvis A God? Cult, Culture and Questions of Method," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2.2 (1998): 197–210 and Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001) chapter 2; and of cultural studies: P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2004), Rojek's *Celebrity*, and Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

2 See Murray Milner, Jr., *Status and Sacredness: A General Theory of Status Relations and an Analysis of Indian Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

harmed by being in a poor movie or play than those who have a leading role for the first time. In addition there is a strong tendency to typecast; actors who make it first as comedians have difficulty getting roles in tragedies, and vice versa.

Second, status is relatively *inexpansible*. Some societies have a per capita income twenty times greater than other societies. Some societies have bows and arrows; others have nuclear weapons. Some are illiterate and some have great universities. Wealth, military power, and knowledge are quite expansible. In contrast, status is relatively inexpansibile since it is a relative ranking. If everyone were in the nobility, membership would have little value. If half of the combat soldiers were awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the status of recipients would be greatly diminished. That is, there would be *status inflation*.[3] This is common for educational credentials and consumer commodities; as soon as most people have a high school diploma, a television, a cell phone, or whatever, these lose their value as status symbols. In other terms, status is primarily a relational or positional good. Because status is inexpansible, when the status of some is increased, the status of others will eventually decrease; if someone moves up, someone will eventually have to move down. Consequently, where status is the central resource, mobility tends to be regulated and restricted. Examples include the Indian caste system, high school cliques, the National Academies of Science, and the low odds that aspiring actors will become stars. The flip side of losing status by others moving up is increasing your status by putting others down. This accounts for the frequency of negative labeling, gossip, and cutting remarks in the status systems of both high schools and Hollywood. A third implication of inexpansibility is that as the size of the relevant social system increases, there is a tendency for status systems to become more pluralistic. In a high school of 200 everyone can know the ten percent who make up the popular crowd. In a school of 2000, ten percent is too many to form a meaningful group; if the popular crowd remains small enough to be visible and known, too many students are excluded, and alternative subcultures—hippies, punks, brains, etc.—emerge and challenge the dominance of the popular crowd. In the entertainment world, as the size of audiences has increased, multiple types of programming and celebrities have emerged. The fans of action movies, soap operas, Broadway plays, hip-hop, and country music tend to have different heroes and idols. A fourth implication is that if some have extremely high status, others will have extremely low status. It is not accidental that where there are Brahmans, there are untouchables, and where quarterbacks are gods and cheerleaders are goddesses, there are nerds and nobodies.

Third, one key source of status is *conformity to the norms* of the group. This is an obvious point, but its consequences are less obvious: those with higher status tend to *elaborate and complicate* the norms. This makes it harder for outsiders and upstarts to

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3 Murray Milner, Jr., *The Illusion of Equality: The Effects of Educational Opportunity on Inequality and Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1972).

conform and become competitors. Mastery of such norms reassures the elite that they are accomplished and sophisticated, and hence deserve their superior status. Therefore, where status is important, traditional elites usually create complex, subtle systems of norms and rituals. These often concern behaviors that are learned early in life—accent, demeanor, body language, and notions of taste and style—because these are all very difficult for outsiders and upstarts to copy. When high status norms can be copied with relative ease, the elite require an alternative strategy; norms must be changed frequently, so that outsiders are always a step behind. This is the reason that keeping up with fashions is often central to modern status systems, including celebrity culture.

Fourth, the other key source of status is *social associations*: obviously associating with those of higher status improves your status, and associating with those of lower status decreases it. This is especially true for intimate, expressive relationships. Sex and eating are key symbols of expressive intimacy. In the caste system, who marries whom and who eats with whom is carefully regulated. Similarly, teenagers are preoccupied with who "goes with" whom and who eats with whom in the lunchroom. Celebrities tend to have romances with other celebrities. Not only do sexual partners affect one's status, but, conversely, status increases sexual attractiveness. Associations with the right objects are also important. Teenagers wear the "right" brands and hang out in the cool places. The wealthy buy "historic" homes and paintings by famous artists. Celebrities who are "professionally beautiful" reinforce their status and attractiveness by surrounding themselves with fashionable objects, having stunning consorts, attending high status events, and living in famous or beautiful places. Associations present a dilemma: the higher the status of one's associates the more one's own status is raised, but the more deference one needs to show these associates.

In sum, the theory of status explains many of the key features of social organization when status is a central resource—the pressures toward conformity, a preoccupation with fashion and styles, the significance of sexual partners, the central role of gossip, carefully regulated mobility, and the difficulty in changing your status once it is established. The list will be expanded as the analysis proceeds.

One other implication of the theory is relevant. I have argued that *sacredness* is a special form of status—the highest levels of relatively unquestioned status.[4] It follows that many of the patterns in religious behavior will parallel those in other status systems. For example, doctrinal debates are likely to occur over whether conformity or association is the best route to the highest possible status for humans: salvation. Some religious traditions emphasize conformity to the law; others emphasize a personal and intimate association with a redeeming savior such as Jesus or Krishna. Such intimacy is often

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[4] See *Status and Sacredness*; and my article "Status and Sacredness: Worship and Salvation as Forms of Status Transformation," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33.2 (June 1994): 99–109.

sought and expressed through sacred meals such as the holy communion of Christianity or the *prasad* of Hinduism. Intimacy may be sought by imagining romantic relationships between the savior and the devotee, as when Catholic nuns become "the bride of Christ" or some Hindus envision themselves to be the Krishna's lover. As we will see celebrity culture has quasi-religious elements.

How Celebrity Culture Is Similar to Other Status Systems

Some of what seem to be the oddest elements of celebrity culture are common to other status systems.

The **Quest for Intimacy:** Cultural critics frequently express wonder, concern, and even outrage at the tendency of fans to seek or imagine intimate connections with celebrities. Women and men write love letters to celebrities they have never met. Fans stand in lines and crowds for long hours to get a glimpse of their idol. Afterward they report to others about how thrilling and important the experience was to them. They seek autographed pictures. They buy T-shirts, playing cards, and cocktail glasses emblazoned with the celebrity's image. They collect almost any object that has some connection with their idol—discarded clothing, old shoes, or pens used to sign autographs—and treat them as highly valued objects. Some even go through garbage or rip clothes off celebrities. A few become stalkers. The producers of celebrity publicity often use this desire for intimacy by providing a near-endless number of media reports that purport to get behind the public image and report what the "private life" of the "real" celebrity is like. This quest for intimacy is characteristic of most status systems.

Religious Parallels: As noted above, celebrity culture has especially strong parallels with certain forms of religious behavior. Celebrities, like famous religious leaders, are usually very charismatic; like shamans they provide a kind of "magic." Often religious language and concepts are invoked, for example, fans saying they "worship" or "idolize" celebrities who they describe as "gods" or "goddesses." In the cases of both gods and celebrities, the devotee and the fan have no concrete social relation with the object of their adoration; in empirical terms the relationship is imagined. Actual patterns of behavior are also similar. Tourists attending a celebrity event in Hollywood are in many ways similar to religious pilgrims at a holy site and vice versa. The responses of fans at a rock concert are in many ways comparable to devotees' behaviors at "spirit-filled" religious events. Posters and memorabilia are obvious analogs of icons and relics.

Gossip: Another aspect of celebrity culture that the theory of status helps to explain is the enormous importance of gossip about celebrities' personal lives. Gossip is a form of attempted or imagined intimacy. As we have seen, intimate expressive relationships affect status much more than instrumental relations; knowing about someone's love life indicates more intimacy than knowing the content of their last speech or movie. Hence, the seemingly endless appetite for news about the personal lives and loves of

celebrities makes good sense: it is by intimate association with higher status beings that one improves one's own status. Obviously, gossip gained through national media such as television or grocery store celebrity papers is not the same kind of intimacy as actually having a close friendship or love affair, but it does provide a kind of virtual intimacy. Of course, privately obtained gossip—knowing a friend who knows the hairdresser of movie star X—is even more valuable. It is analogous to the teenager who is not part of the popular crowd, but who has "his sources" and always seems to know "what's happening"; his "inside" knowledge raises his status with his peers.

Loss of Mystery: Too much intimacy can also be a problem: it reduces the social distance so much that admiration, awe, and mystery are eliminated; familiarity breeds contempt. Celebrities who court too much publicity about their personal lives run a risk; they become like the "slut" who is "too easy" and hence uninteresting. Attempts are made to offset this by being deliberately coy or mysterious—for example, publicly going out with another celebrity, but announcing "we're just good friends." A key to maintaining high status in general and stardom in particular is the careful management and rationing of social distance and intimacy.

Ambivalence: Such rationing creates other problems: devotees may see their idols as inconsistent and even capricious. This is why fans are often ambivalent. They admire or envy celebrities, but resent what is seen as their aloofness and arrogance. Land-controlling castes in India give public deference and gifts to Brahmans because priests are needed to perform weddings and other social rituals, but they often belittle them in private. Teenagers both attempt to associate with more popular peers and criticize them behind their backs. Fans often take delight when celebrities are revealed to be involved in unseemly behavior. As Joshua Gamson points out, fans may be less devotees than cynical spectators who get some fun out of the foibles and fates of those who are famous.[5]

Solidarity: The theory of status relations also offers links to related theories. Defining sacredness as a special form of status enables us to draw on the insights of Emile Durkheim's theory of religion. According to Durkheim a key function of religion is to produce social solidarity in the society through two mechanisms: First, by relating human beings to a sacred entity that is wholly other and superior. This otherness and superiority of the sacred entity makes differences and inequalities between humans seem irrelevant. All fellow humans are frail, mortal, weak, and low status compared to gods. Second, by engaging in ritualized worship of the sacred, people share a powerful and meaningful common experience. Such experiences not only affect them at the time, but are remembered and recounted both privately and publicly.[6] Analogous patterns are seen among fans attending celebrity events. Many seem to enjoy the solidarity

[5] See Gamson's *Claims to Fame*.

they have with other fans at least as much as any contact with or sight of the celebrity they might have.

In sum, the behavior of both fans and performers has many similarities with people's behavior in other status systems. What often seems odd or crazy is not that different from behavior that is taken for granted in other contexts.

What Is Distinctive about Celebrity Culture?

One of the recurring laments of contemporary cultural and social critics is that in the past people were famous because of their deeds or hard work, but today celebrities are those who are "well-known for their well-knownness," to use Boorstin's often cited phrase. Well-knownness is often based on superficial accomplishments and what Boorstin called "pseudo-events."[7] Those who have become celebrities on reality television by eating worms or allowing the intimate details of their lives to be broadcast are often cited as examples of this kind of triviality and, more generally, of the deterioration and poverty of contemporary culture. The more elaborate versions of this lament look at the production of celebrities and tend to emphasize that they are largely the creation of elaborate public relations operations involving agents, publicists, coaches, and executives, who are in various ways part of the entertainment industry.

Alexander the Great was undoubtedly a brilliant military leader, but he did have a king for a father and Aristotle for a tutor.

While I share many of these concerns, it must be kept in mind that the status accorded people has rarely been solely or even primarily a matter of merit—even taking into account cultural and historical differences in what constitutes merit. Over the course of history, probably the most important determinants of status have been age, gender, and having the right parents. Even those who became famous for what they accomplished often started out with considerable advantages. Alexander the Great was undoubtedly a brilliant military leader, but he did have a king for a father and Aristotle for a tutor. Moreover, in probably every historical period status and fame were in part the result of "PR." Warriors and aristocrats typically hired bards to sing about, and often to exaggerate, their accomplishments and their virtues. On a more mundane level, many students take special courses on how to take the SATs or GREs, rather than studying to increase their substantive knowledge. Those looking for a job seek instruction on how to write resumes, and these resumes seldom list failures and indiscretions. As Erving Goffman pointed out many years ago, in even the most routine and mundane types of

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6 See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free, 1965).

7 Boorstin 57.

social interaction there is nearly always a difference between front-stage and backstage behavior, between what we deliberately make publicly visible and what we try to keep to ourselves or our most intimate of associates.[8] So the gap between public image and private reality is not new or unique to celebrities.

This is not, however, to say that nothing new or different is occurring today in American culture—there are several changes worth noting:

Visibility: The nature and significance of social visibility has changed in important ways. Visibility is, of course, a prerequisite to any kind of social status. The great baritone who sings only in the shower is not famous; the serial murderer who eludes detection is not infamous. Hence, changes in the structure and nature of visibility are likely to produce changes in the nature of status.

Two obvious interrelated processes have been at work during the modern period. First, there has been a trend toward larger and more impersonal social networks and systems; nationalism, urbanism, multinational corporations, and globalization are all aspects of this. The larger and more complex the social network, the more problematic visibility is and the more it becomes a prerequisite to status.

Second, our sources of information and communication have expanded enormously, and the relative importance of interpersonal communication has declined. The rate and extensiveness of this trend exploded in the twentieth century with the development of the telephone, radio, cinema, television, and the Internet. As people's life experiences have become tied to events around the world or to hours and hours of virtual events portrayed in television dramas, the relevant status arenas have changed. Since more time is spent on magazines, television, and the Internet than on talking to people in the neighborhood, visibility in these media increases in value; being known in the neighborhood decreases in importance. That is, the status arenas that people care about change.

Another important change is the increased importance of images and the decreased importance of words and texts. "One picture may be worth a thousand words" if you are trying to determine the beauty or sexual attractiveness of someone, but much less useful if you are trying to determine his or her intelligence, character, or knowledge. There are probably many reasons for the increased display of sexual imagery, but the low cost, ease, and effectiveness with which modern media communicate beauty and sexual attractiveness are certainly some of them. The result is that appearance has become more important. In the past, good looks were based on comparisons to those who were in your local community; now people are judged in relation to supermodels

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8 See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1959).

from around the world. Moreover, since the images of supermodels are ubiquitous, it is little wonder that cosmetics, stylish clothes, and cosmetic surgery have increased in importance.

To the degree that visibility has become a criteria of status, conformity to social norms—other than the norm of maximizing one's visibility—has become less crucial as a source of status. Another way of saying this is that celebrities are less and less moral exemplars.

Celebrification: Both Joshua Gamson and Chris Rojek use the concept of "celebrification." It is a rather awkward term, but like "industrialization" and "bureaucratization," it refers to a broad historical and social trend. Gamson identifies celebrification primarily in relationship to the effects of Hollywood, but Rojek broadens the concept.[9] I will use the notion to refer to both the increasing centrality of celebrities to the culture and how relationships between ordinary people become similar to the relationship of celebrities to their audiences. It is the latter aspect that I will focus on here. First, it is obvious that people often emulate celebrities with respect to dress and style. Second, like celebrities, there seems to be a greater "split" between the public and the private self. Moreover, the public self is more varied and complex than in the past. For example, people may put on a very different public face for their family, job, church, and PTA. Third, the public face that is presented often involves preparing and rehearsing. It is not accidental that when it is time to perform in almost any situation—from a school class presentation to a presidential address—the phrase "show time" may be invoked. Fourth, a person's visibility in extended, impersonal networks has become more central in day-to-day life. This shift away from the personal is indicated by the increased importance of "networking," resumes, personal websites. Fifth, just as celebrities have limited direct contact with their audiences, many relationships are carried on with a minimum face-to-face interaction via e-mail, cell phones, message boards, blogs, etc. Sixth, over time a higher proportion of social relationships are more temporary. Celebrities work with many co-stars, for various directors and studios, and often have a series of lovers or spouses. Ordinary people increasingly have multiple employers, careers, spouses, and families. Of course, much of the behavior of ordinary folk is due to the same technological and historical changes that created modern celebrities. Nonetheless, the increasing centrality of celebrities to elite culture has played its own role as a model for day-to-day life, resulting in many people attempting to become diminutive versions of a celebrity.

Commodification: Celebrification and its new forms of visibility have new forms of access. Visibility at a New England town meeting only required showing up and speaking up. Visibility on television and other media must be paid for. This commodification of visibility has multiple aspects. Advertisers and political candidates who want

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9 See Gamson's *Claims to Fame* and Rojek's *Celebrity*.

to present their messages on television must purchase time on the air—usually at very high rates. In order for those who operate networks and cable companies to attract such advertisers and charge such rates, they must be able to attract large audiences. The audiences must also have the right social characteristics: politicians are not interested in audiences of non-voters; skateboard advertisers are not interested in audiences of sixty-year-olds. Consequently, networks invest enormous amounts of money to create the programming that will attract large audiences of the right kind. The result is a very careful selection of what is aired and a strong emphasis on people who will attract the audiences their advertisers want. Often this is accomplished by using stars and celebrities who must be paid very large fees and salaries and who are portrayed as leading very glamorous lives. Another way to attract audiences is to show ordinary people engaged in some kind of sensational, shocking, or humorous behavior or event. Reality television is a recent example, but "Candid Camera" was an earlier version of this strategy. Similar processes operate for radio and the print media—"if it bleeds it leads."

There are two key consequences of celebrification and commodification. First, the technological possibility and the commercial need for large audiences initially leads to careful rationing of the visibility of these media, which contributes to the high status of visual media. Second, gaining visibility consequently *becomes an accomplishment in itself.* Hence, sheer visibility becomes a mark of status; fame and notoriety become more difficult to distinguish.

Status of the Media: Another process is at work. Once network television became the standard, other media tended to lose status. It was more impressive to be on television than to have your picture in the paper, more impressive to be a reporter on television than for a newspaper. Once this shift occurred, the media that involved moving images were seen as more desirable even when they were not scarce. So while the emergence of personal video cameras, cable networks, and the Internet have made creating images relatively easy, they still have higher prestige and appeal, especially to younger generations.

Mobility: Celebrity status systems are much less stable than more traditional status systems, and the theory of status relations helps us to understand why. First, exchange in a commodified system is explicit rather than implicit. Stars get paid enormous sums, and fans usually pay not only for access to performances, but for memorabilia of various kinds—and usually at inflated prices. Second, many fans are well aware of the enormous publicity apparatuses that tout the celebrity's accomplishments and leak "secrets" about his or her "private" life. Consequently, much more cynicism is expressed about modern celebrities. The implicit perpetual question of fans is, "What have you done for us lately?" Third, since style and fashion is central to postmodern social life, there are also fashions about the kinds of celebrities and performances that are popular with audiences. For example, by the 1980s television westerns and family comedies were

"out," and police and lawyers were "in." More concretely, writers and producers copied *Hill Street Blues* and *L.A. Law*, not *Gun Smoke, Life with Father*, and *I Love Lucy*. This in turn shaped who became celebrities and the public image they projected. Obviously, new fashions have replaced the 1980s television programming and celebrities. Such fashions also occurred for the stage, cinema, music, and art, but the weekly episode structure of television probably produces a more rapid pattern of overexposure and change. Fourth, because the centrality of images has made beauty and looks more important, aging soon takes its toll. Relatively few stars who were "hot" when they were in their physical prime maintain their appeal throughout a long career.

Pluralism: The scope of audiences has become enormous and diversified. Japanese and Indian movie directors are famous in the West; Mexican soap operas are popular not only among Spanish speakers, but in Turkey; Indian Bollywood movies are watched in the Middle East; Hong Kong martial arts films have a world audience. Moreover, as previously noted, cable networks, satellites, and the Internet have greatly expanded the arenas for both dramatic performances and news. That is to say, the size of the cultural system has increased immensely. Hollywood has ceased to be the only center of popular culture; numerous subcultures have developed. There are many different kinds of specialized celebrities, from the host of C-Span book discussions to the top West African musicians, from radical talk show hosts on Pacifica Radio to Nashville singing stars and the endless array of guests on morning and late night television. Many celebrities are famous, but only with relatively specialized audiences. These tendencies qualify—but do not eliminate—the selectivity and rationing of visibility, but without significantly reducing the prestige of being visible on public media. If anything, it may have increased the importance of public media relative to direct interpersonal interaction. Hence, being "known" seems increasingly to be defined in terms of visibility on public media. None of this is "news," of course, but the theory of status relations helps us to understand why this is happening and points out how this is both similar to and different from other kinds of cultural pluralism: the basic structural dynamics are similar, but the sheer scope of the audiences, the cultural distance between performers and audiences, and the centrality of public media is unprecedented.

Cultural Criticism: The Status of a Status System

What is cultural criticism? It is the advocacy of a particular status system: a system that assigns a high status to the content of some cultural patterns and a low, or even reprehensible, status to the content of other cultural patterns. Such status systems rank not only individuals and groups, but ideas, ideals, and objects. Some art is rated as beautiful or inspiring; some is thought to be mundane, trivial, and banal. Morality is assigning higher status to some patterns of human conduct and lower status to other patterns on the basis of principles defining "right" and "wrong." Certainly human society would cease to exist if it did not differentially evaluate most aspects of human experience. So social evaluation and status hierarchies are in some respects inescapable. The content of

systems of morality, reality, and aesthetics—the good, the true, and the beautiful—are, however, conditioned by the material conditions of the culture. The morality of putting severely deformed babies out in the cold to die is likely to be evaluated differently in hunting and gathering societies than in modern industrial societies. Changes in the material context often produce changes in the cultural status systems. To recognize this is not to embrace technological determinism; cultural content can shape and affect the use of new technologies. Poison gas may be a powerful weapon, but it has been internationally outlawed and for the most part this law has been honored. A similar trend is under way with respect to land mines.

When, however, there are fundamental technological changes, they can rarely be adequately governed and regulated by the old cultural assumptions. The ruling ideas of a period may not be simply the ideas of the ruling class, but existing cultural assumptions are usually extolled more enthusiastically by established elites than by the general population. Aristocracies found it hard to conceive that new kinds of weapons would make their martial skills and the feudal ways of organizing armies irrelevant, much less that such changes would undermine the rationale for their authority and privileges. Even more unthinkable was the notion that they should be subject to the same laws as commoners or that the masses were capable of running a government by means of representative democracy.

My point is not that we should be uncritical of popular culture in general and celebrity culture in particular. Nonetheless, laments that are overly nostalgic about the past are likely to be irrelevant. Effective critique must grapple with the consequences of the new patterns of communication, information, and social solidarity. We are unlikely to come to terms with the importance of sheer visibility unless we grasp its sources and its consequences. Allowing visibility to be primarily a commodity that is bought and sold to the highest bidder is certainly part of the problem. This seems especially detrimental to politics, forcing politicians to become primarily fund raisers and celebrities. This is not, however, the sole or even primary problem. The emergence of writing and the cultural centrality of texts were certainly related to the economic interests of the time; writing seems to have been developed primarily for commercial purposes. But obviously its consequences were much broader than this. Similarly the new centrality of moving images, combined with texts, and communicated instantly throughout the world has produced fundamental shifts in the patterns of human social interaction. This is not to say that all of the old patterns are irrelevant and should be abandoned. Nonetheless new status systems for ranking the kinds of culture that should have high and low status are emerging. The question is not whether we can restore the old system, but whether we can create new understandings of the good, the true, and the beautiful that enhance rather than degrade human experience.