

DISCUSSION

1. Asma refers to contemporary politics as our “veiled value system” (p. 26). What do you think he means by this phrase? What vision of political life does this suggest? Does this vision accord with your own views?
2. In our day, writes Asma, environmentalism has come to serve as “a substitute for religion” (p. 27). How do you respond to this claim? In your view, is it valid to liken this kind of political stance to religious belief? And how does such a comparison change the way we typically think about environmentalism?
3. In Asma’s reading of Western history, guilt has long served as the glue for keeping society intact. “All this internalized self-loathing,” he writes, “is the cost we pay for being civilized” (p. 26). Do you agree? Is “guilt” or “self-loathing” necessary to maintaining social cohesion? Can you think of an example that confirms this hypothesis?

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4. For Asma, the intense debates around environmentalism are but one example of a much broader trend within our current pop culture: “Large segments of the news seem calculated to facilitate the catharsis of our built-up resentment. Daytime talk shows and reality shows seem similarly designed to elicit our righteous anger” (p. 28). Conduct your own pop culture analysis to assess the validity of Asma’s claim. First, choose a cultural text (i.e., TV show, website, advertisement, etc.) that, in your view, seems designed to elicit audience anger. Then use this text as a case study for testing out Asma’s hypothesis. Given the issues it raises, the tone it strikes, the audience it addresses, does this text seem “calculated to facilitate catharsis”? If so, what kind? And how do you evaluate the ultimate effect? Is it positive? Negative?
5. “Instead of religious sins plaguing our conscience,” Asma declares, “we now have the transgressions of leaving the water running, leaving the lights on, failing to recycle, and using plastic grocery bags instead of paper” (p. 27). Write a longer essay (three to five pages) in which you identify and evaluate the comparison Asma is making here. According to Asma, what are the key differences between the “religious sins” of the past and the “transgressions” that characterize everyday life today? And what larger point is he trying to make here about the way our understanding of “sin” has changed? Then take a closer look at each of the “transgressions” he lists here. To what extent, in your view, is it valid to feel “guilty” about each? Is it helpful, necessary, and/or right for these oversights to “plague our conscience”? Why or why not?
6. “[L]ike every other ism,” writes Asma, environmentalism “has the potential for dogmatic zeal and obsession” (p. 29). In light of his own examination of an “ism” — in this case, “patriotism” — do you think Michael Eric Dyson (p. 52) would agree? Given what he has to say about different forms patriotism can take in modern America, do you think Dyson would express sympathy or agreement with Asma’s point regarding the “dogmatic” or “obsessive” nature of all “isms”? Why or why not? As you answer this question, look for passages from Dyson’s essay that seem most pertinent, and spend some time explaining how they help support your own argument here.

TY BURR

The Faces in the Mirror

Celebrities have beguiled us since the days of the earliest silent movies. But why we have remained so fascinated for so long is far from a straightforward matter. Do we obsessively focus on celebrities because we love them or loathe them? Do we look upon their lives as an unattainable ideal or a cautionary tale? Taking up these kinds of questions, Ty Burr presents us with a brief history of celebrity and celebrity worship in modern America. When we look at celebrities, he asks, what exactly do we see? To what extent do we use celebrities as a kind of mirror, reflecting back what we wish (or fear) to see in ourselves? Ty Burr is film critic for the *Boston Globe*. He is the author of two books: *The Best Old Movies for Families: A Guide to Watching Together* (2007) and *Gods Like Us: On Movie Stardom and Modern Fame* (2012), from which the selection below is excerpted.

WHAT ARE THE STARS REALLY LIKE?

That question is not the subject of this book. The subject of this book is why we ask the question in the first place.

Still, people want to know. In my day job, I’m a professional film critic for a major metropolitan daily newspaper and throughout the 1990s I wrote reviews and articles for a national weekly entertainment magazine. Over the years, I’ve interviewed a number of actors and directors, ingénues and legends, and often the first question I’m asked by people is just that: What are they *really* like?

The answers always disappoint. Always. They range from “Pretty much what you see on the screen” to “Not all that interesting sometimes” to “Pleasantly professional” to an unspoken “Why do you care?” When pressed (and I’m usually pressed), I’ll allow that Keira Knightley and I had a lovely chat once and Lauren Bacall was nastier than she needed to be to a young reporter just starting out. That Laura Linney seemed graciously guarded, Steve Carell centered and sincere, Kevin Spacey cagey and smart. I once took the young Elijah Wood to a Hollywood burger joint while interviewing him for the magazine. He was a kid who really liked that burger, no more and no less.

They are, in short, working actors, life-sized and fallible. There is no mystery here. But this is not what you want to hear, is it? If there’s nothing genuinely special about movie stars, why do we give them our money? Why do we pay for cheaper and cheaper substitutes—reality stars, hotel heiresses, the Kardashians? Are we interested in the actual person behind the star façade, or just desperate to believe the magic has a basis in reality?

In truth, the relationship between persona and person can be problematic. Of all the celebrity encounters I've experienced, the one that sticks with me is the briefest, most random, possibly the saddest. Early one morning, many years ago, I came out of my apartment building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and got ready to go for a run. As I breathed the spring air, the door to the adjoining building opened and another jogger emerged. We started stretching our hamstrings side by side, and I glanced over and acknowledged the other man with a friendly nod.

Three almost invisible things happened in rapid succession. First, he nodded back with a pleasant smile. Second, I realized that he was Robin Williams. Third, he realized that I realized he was Robin Williams, and his eyes went dead. Not just dead: empty. It was as if the storefront to his face had been shuttered, cutting off any possibility of interaction. There wasn't anything rude about this, and I respected his privacy, honoring the code observed by all New Yorkers who know they can potentially cross paths with an A-list name at any corner deli. Or was it his celebrity I was respecting? Whichever, a very small moment of human connection between two people had been squelched by the appearance of a third,

not-quite-real person: the movie star. The second I recognized who the other jogger was, his persona got in the way. I couldn't not see him as "Robin Williams." And he knew it.

This happens dozens of times in any well-known person's day. It's why Williams's eyes shut down so completely; it's why I left him alone and went for my run. I felt bad for the man, even if I hadn't actually done anything.

Because people do, in fact, do things. Think of all those fans who meet movie stars and insist on being photographed with them, the snapshot serving as both proof and relic. Think, too, of the man who shot and killed John Lennon but made sure to get his autograph first.

Why a history of movie stardom? To celebrate, interrogate, and marvel over where we've been, and to weigh where we are now. As the twenty-first century settles into its second decade, we are more than ever a culture that worships images and shrinks from realities. Once those images were graven; now they are projected, broadcast, podcast, blogged, and streamed. There is not a public space that doesn't have a screen to distract us from our lives, nor is there a corner of our private existence that doesn't offer an interface, wireless or not, with the Omniverse, that rolling sea of infotainment we jack into from multiple access points a hundred times a day. The

Omniverse isn't real, but it's never turned off. You can't touch it, but you can't escape from it. And its most common unit of exchange, the thing that attracts so many people in the hopes of becoming it, is celebrity. Famous people. Stars.

Or what we've traditionally called stars, which traditionally arose from a place called the movies. As originally conceived during the heyday of the Hollywood studio system, movie stars were bigger and more beautiful than they are now, domestic gods who looked like us but with our imperfections removed (or, in some cases, gorgeously heightened). Our feelings about them were mixed. We wanted to be these people, and we were jealous of them too. We paid to see them in the stories the movie factories packaged for us, but we were just as fascinated—more fascinated, really—with the stories we believed happened offscreen, to the people the stars seemed to be.

Not many of us remember those days. Moreover, few are interested in connecting the dots between what we want from the movie stars now and what we wanted from them then—and the "then" before that, and the "then" before that, all the way back to the first flickering images in Thomas Edison's laboratory. The desires have changed, but so has the intensity. Mass media fame, a cultural concept that arose a century ago as a side effect of a new technology called moving pictures, now not only drives the popular culture of America (and, by extension, much of the world), but has become for many people a central goal and measure of self-worth.

When we were content to gaze up at movie stars on a screen that seemed bigger than life, the exchange was fairly simple. We paid money to watch our daily dilemmas acted out on a dreamlike stage, with ourselves recast as people who were prettier, smarter, tougher, or just not as scared. The stories illustrated the dangers of ambition, the ecstasies of falling in love, the sheer delight of song and dance. Because certain people embodied uniquely charismatic variations on how to react in certain situations—Bogart's street smarts, Kate Hepburn's gumption, Jimmy Stewart's bruised decency, Bette Davis's refusal ever to budge—we wanted to see them over and over again.

We wanted to be them. Why else would women have bought knock-offs of Joan Crawford's white organdy dress in 1932's *Letty Linton* (half a million sold through Macy's) or men have chosen to go without an undershirt like Clark Gable in 1934's *It Happened One Night*? On an even deeper level, we also burned with resentment at the stars' presumption to set themselves up as gods when our egos told us we were the ones deserving of attention. Behind every adoring fan letter is the urge to murder and replace. An image that reoccurs time and again

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in the pages that follow is that of a star out in public, surrounded by a mob that grabs and tears, ripping off buttons, chunks of clothing, as if to simultaneously absorb and obliterate the object of affection. There is love there and also a powerful, inarticulate rage. We want the stars, but we want what they have even more.

The strange part is that we got it . . . The history of modern stardom isn't just a roll call of icons but a narrative of how those icons affected the people and society that watched them, what psychic and cultural needs each star answered, and how that has changed over time. It's an ever-evolving story of industrial consolidation intertwined with technological advancement, each wondrous new machine bringing the dream tantalizingly closer to the control of the *dreamers*—to us.

The early cinema, for instance, allowed audiences to see actors close up, which rendered them both more specific and more archetypal than the players of the stage. The arrival of sound then let us hear the new stars' voices. Radio brought those voices into our homes; TV brought the rest of the performer, repackaged for fresh rules of engagement. Home video let us own the stars and watch them when we wanted; video cameras allowed us to play at being stars ourselves. The Internet has merely completed the process by providing an instant worldwide distribution and exhibition platform for our new star-selves, however many of them we want to manufacture.

In addition, an extremely profit-driven group of entertainment conglomerates now keeps the popular culture rapt in a feedback loop of movie stars, TV stars, pop stars, rap stars, tweener stars, reality stars, and Internet stars, all mutable, all modeling ways in which consumers can alter their own homemade identities for maximum appeal to friends and strangers. The revolution is complete. One hundred years ago, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and a handful of others became the very first living human beings to be simultaneously recognizable to, in theory, everyone on earth. Today, a twelve-year-old child can achieve the same status with an afternoon, a digital camera, and a YouTube account. We have built the mirror we always dreamed about, and we cannot look away.

. . . The classic star system—as created by the Hollywood studios in the teens and twenties and sustained through the 1960s and, although much diminished, into the present day—was modern humanity's Rorschach test. We looked at those inkblots on the screen and saw what we needed: proof of discrete, individual, desirable human types. The system evolved, with stars falling away and new ones rising as necessary to the cultural demands of the time. Marlon Brando would have been unthinkable before World War II, and yet postwar Hollywood would be unthinkable without him. Each

era has its own yearnings, pop star responses, and technological developments that change how the machine works, and each is a further step toward where we are now.

Where are we now? A way station, I believe, on the way to someplace very different, more truthful in some aspects, profoundly less so in others. A century of mass media and the concept of "stardom" have changed human society in ways we can barely encompass, but the one constant has been an urge toward personal fulfillment and freedom of identity that would have seemed perverse, if not sacrilegious, to our grandparents' grandparents.

Centuries ago, the common man's worth was marked primarily by *duty*—how hard he worked and how hard he prayed. The notion of "ego," of something unique within each individual person that needed to be expressed, was alien. What stars there were tended to be generals and kings, religious leaders and charlatans, and you didn't aspire to be like them. You simply followed where they led, or you kept your head down and worked the farm.

The movies helped change that. (All votes for movable type, the Enlightenment, the decline of the agrarian state, Sigmund Freud, and the rise of constitutional self-government will be counted.) The new medium tricked us, though, because it turned flesh-and-blood actors into dream-like phantoms writ large upon a wall. They didn't speak at first, either, so you could impose upon them any voice, any meaning, you wished. The stars thus became better versions of ourselves, idealized role models who literally acted out the things we wanted to do but didn't dare. If they died, as Cagney always seemed to, we still got safely up and went home.

Somewhere along the line, after many decades, we learned *not* to trust these role models anymore. Technology is inextricable in this, because each new medium effectively disproves the one preceding it. TV is somehow "better" than the movies, video and cable are "better" than network TV, the Internet is "better" than five hundred channels of Comcast. "Better" means less restricted in location and time, more portable, and more directly serving the immediate needs of you and me. We plug into star culture and its discontents on our cell phones now. The latest slice of the Lindsay Lohan/Mel Gibson/Charlie Sheen Meltdown Show is right there any time we want it.

When a specific medium is put out to pasture, so are its most representative figures, as the stars of the silent era would be the first to tell you. At the same time, that primal ache has never gone away. If anything, it has gotten stronger, because each wave of technology doesn't always make our lives better. Busier, yes, and faster. More than anything else, it just brings us closer to the mirror in which we reflect ourselves to the world. We still each in our own way ache to be somebody, to make our

mark, to stand out from the crowd, to *be seen*. Otherwise, who are we? What's life for? Uniqueness of identity is the promise movie stars hold out to us; if they're able to separate themselves from the swarm of humanity, so might we.

I wonder what Marlene Dietrich would make of all this. *There was a woman who knew from desire and who trusted a cameraman to keep her secret*—that the magnificently shadowed creature of all those early '30s classics was an ordinary German girl with bedroom eyes. Or the other Hollywood gods—what would they think? Archie Leach and Ruby Stevens, Frances Gumm and Marion Morrison and Norma Jean Mortenson.

Who? Well, yes, you know them as Cary Grant and Barbara Stanwyck, Judy Garland and John Wayne and Marilyn Monroe. Those original names were left in the closet, along with Roy Scherer's—excuse me, Rock Hudson's—homosexuality. Entire pasts were abridged or erased because they didn't jibe with the luxuriant beauty onscreen, the gorgeous lie. The movie moguls kept the secrets, and the press played along because they understood that, really, we didn't want to know.

With some exceptions, though, the mystery that surrounded movie stars for the better part of a century is now highly suspect. Indeed, many pop consumers consider it their duty to pull down the idols and pass their dirty secrets around the Web. How can we trust Tom Cruise the

movie star when we can Google the “real” one bouncing on Oprah's couch? We now have as much control over the idea of celebrity as the studio publicity departments once did, and is it any wonder that movie stars are ruthlessly mocked while our own sweet selves are headlining on YouTube?

Is this something like revenge? Or is it just the evolution of a species gradually conditioned to narcissism? For a century we accepted stardom as a blessing

visited on those more gifted than we, a state of grace to which you and I in our drabness could not, and should not, aspire. We knew our place, and it was in the fifth row of the Bijou, worshiping as MGM chief Louis B. Mayer handed out the communion wafers. In 1919, when Chaplin and Pickford joined with Douglas Fairbanks and D.W. Griffith in creating United Artists, the first movie studio run by the talent, the other movie moguls complained “that the inmates had taken over the asylum.” If only they knew. Sometime in the past two decades, between video and pay cable and the rise of the World Wide Web, the walls were breached and the masses poured in. The asylum is now ours.

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You could see it coming a long way off, actually—since the late 1960s, with their anarchic overturning of the old ways. (Or maybe even further back, when Elvis arrived—an outsider who didn't need a new name.) The acknowledged motto of the new star order is Andy Warhol's much-abused announcement in the catalog of a 1968 Swedish art show that “in the future everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.” A better, more concise variation came a year later, when Sly Stone recorded the number one pop hit “Everybody Is a Star.”

The song's title was offered in a spirit of blissful hippie democracy, a counterculture version of the same promise that had lured tens of thousands of men and women to California and the entertainment industry over the decades. That promise said that you are the center of the universe, if only you can get the rest of the world to see it. Sly tweaked it enough to take the desperate edge off. Stay home, the song advises, and take heart. You are *already* your own star. Technology would eventually prove Stone correct. In effect, he predicted the Internet down to the size of a blogger's bedroom.

What happens to stardom, then, when we at last become stars ourselves? It mutates and spreads in a thousand directions. From our new perch we can now ridicule stars like Cruise, Gibson, Christian Bale, disseminating their audiovisual missteps to the world at large. We can lightly or wholly fictionalize our existence on Facebook or Second Life, developing plot threads, heroes, villains as we go: life not lived but shaped and produced. The new rules have also helped establish the half-lit world of reality TV, with its stars who are not stars because they are us (or less), as well as grotesque mash-ups of fame-mongering like *I Want a Famous Face!*, the 2004 MTV series that featured regular folks who volunteered to undergo surgery to look like their favorite celebrity. One wonders what these people felt when they came out of anesthesia and found they were still the same inside. . . .

. . . If there's a thematic through-line, it's in the ways the gods and goddesses of Hollywood were yanked off their thrones over the years as audiences increasingly demanded stars who looked and acted like them—i.e., people who seemed real rather than fake—and as the industry got better at the job of providing those stars. In 1949, Marlon Brando made every other Hollywood actor look like a fraud; twenty years later, Dustin Hoffman, Jack Nicholson, and Robert De Niro served as the new benchmarks in realism. Today it's the cast of *Jersey Shore* who are signifiers of actuality at its most extreme—a “realness” that makes us feel better about our own.

Yes the classic movie star lives on—has to live on, if only to give us something better to aspire to than Snookie and the Situation. We still have a varied buffet of star types before us, from the impenetrable Hollywood gloss of Jolie and Brad Pitt to the scruffy approachability of

recent arrivals like Ellen Page and Joseph Gordon-Levitt. Younger audiences respond to those last two because they speak and act in ways that resonate with how people their age actually see themselves, as Hoffman did in the 1960s, as Mickey Rooney did in the 1930s. We want performers who reflect our reality—who seem to order that reality, comment on it, laugh at it, blow it up. The ones who do so with an appealing consistency of persona across a range of movies or other forms of media are those we call stars.

A distinction can and should be made between stars and actors. All stars are actors one way or another; not all actors are stars. Great actors—the true master craftsmen and women—transform themselves in role after role, and if the projects are successful and the actor is celebrated enough, that changeability becomes his or her persona, whether it's Lon Chaney in the silent era, Alec Guinness after World War II, Meryl Streep in the 1980s, or Cate Blanchett today.

Stars, by contrast, don't hide themselves. On the contrary, the great movie stars each construct an image that is bigger than their individual films even as it connects those films in a narrative of unfolding personality. This is important. . . . every successful star creates a persona and within that persona is an idea. The films are merely variations on the idea. The idea can be expressed as action or as attitude or simply as an unstated philosophy of how to live and behave in this world (or how not to live and how not to behave) that the player embodies in charismatic, two-dimensional human form. You could call it identity, too, but it's identity so contained, defined, and appealing that moviegoers grasp at it in an attempt to define their own senses of self. . . .

Some of the questions we need to ask ourselves are the same as they've been for decades. Why does a particular star speak to one era but not another? How much of any celebrity is his or her own invention and how much our projection? Other questions are vastly different from those of a century, half a century, even a decade ago. Why do we pay to see famous actors in a movie theater, then go home and make fun of them on the Web? Why do we still need Hollywood's manufactured identities when we can create them for ourselves? Am I my Facebook page, or the other way around? Why, oh Lord, do we Google ourselves? And how are we supposed to stop when it feels so good?

DISCUSSION

1. How are we taught to think about fame? To what extent is the prospect of "being famous" promoted in our popular culture as a social script? Can you think of any settings in contemporary life where we are especially encouraged to act out this script?
2. The book from which this selection is excerpted is titled *Gods Like Us* (2012). What do you make of this title? What larger point about our cultural obsession with celebrity is Burr making by choosing this title?
3. When it comes to celebrities, Burr declares, there is an important distinction to draw between *personality* and *persona*. How do you understand the difference between these two terms? And what larger point about fame and famous people is Burr trying to make by drawing this distinction?

WRITING

4. Among other things, Burr is interested in exploring the effect the rise of digital culture has had on the ways we think about fame. "There is not a public space that doesn't have a screen to distract us from our lives, nor is there a corner of our private existence that doesn't offer an interface, wireless or not, with the Omniverse, that roiling sea of infotainment we jack into from multiple access points a hundred times a day" (p. 32). In a short essay, analyze and evaluate the specific claim Burr is making here. What point is he trying to make about the new roles the Web has created for us and about the way these roles have changed how we think about celebrity? Do you agree? Why or why not?
5. "One hundred years ago, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and a handful of others became the very first living human beings to be simultaneously recognizable to, in theory, everyone on earth. Today, a twelve-year-old child can achieve the same status with an afternoon, a digital camera, and a YouTube account. We have built the mirror we always dreamed about, and we cannot look away" (p. 34). In a three- to five-page essay, describe, analyze, and evaluate the thesis Burr is advancing here. What larger point is Burr trying to make by comparing the Hollywood stars of old to a twelve-year-old with a YouTube account, the tools of digital culture to a mirror from which we "cannot look away"? How valid are his points?
6. Burr's essay describes the commodification of people: images that end up as brands and marketed like any other product. How do you think Michael Sandel (p. 40) would respond to this idea? Given the argument he makes about the "morality of markets," do you think he would assess our contemporary culture of celebrity in positive or negative terms? Why?