Stars and Celebrities

LEARNING OUTCOME 1: IDENTIFY PRINCIPAL ISSUES IN MEDIA AND CULTURAL STUDIES
Stars and Celebrities

Earnings = $75 million in 2012

Earnings = $85 million in 2012

Earnings = $110 million in 2012
Questions to Consider

1. Have there always been celebrities?

2. To what extent are celebrities created by the media?

3. Why is the public attracted to celebrities?

4. What might the changing nature of celebrity suggest about society?
Considering Question 1:

Have there always been celebrities?

- 1842 – First illustrated newspaper
- 1880 – First photograph in newspaper
- Images linked to text = growing fascination with famous people
- 1824 – First use of the term ‘star’ to refer to the lead actor/actress in a stage production
- 1849 – The definition of the term ‘celebrity’ as ‘a famous person’ first appears in the Oxford English Dictionary
The difference between celebrities and stars:

- Celebrities are famous beyond a single area of achievement.

- Many celebrities are also stars; but all stars do not necessarily seek or achieve celebrity status (‘Opera Star’ or ‘Star Chef’)

- Definition of celebrity = a person ‘whose image circulates without being attached to their initial professional role (whether this be actor, presenter, criminal, politician, and so on)’ (Evans, p. 4)
Charles Dickens, The First Celebrity?

• Actively cultivated his public image and courted publicity

• Biographical details were widely known during his lifetime

• Novels were popular; but so was he

• The word ‘celebrity’ first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* at the height of Dickens’ fame
Mark Twain, The First ‘Celebrity Brand’?

- Physically recognisable due to his trademark white suit, white hair, white moustache
- Copyrighted his own image
- Twain was ‘the most advertised man in the world’ according to J. P. Morgan (the richest man in the world)
The Studio System in Hollywood

• Readers began to expect that the news would include stories about their favourite film and stage stars, singers and sports heroes

• The stars (rather than the stories films told) sold movies to the public

• Stars signed to contracts that required them to market themselves through magazines, merchandise, fan clubs, etc.

• Until the 1950s, public images of celebrities were carefully managed
Considering Question 2:
To what extent are stars and celebrities created by the media?

- Max Weber: a celebrity has ‘an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men’ (quoted in Dyer [1979], p. 35)

- Jessica Evans: ‘individuals do not become celebrities as a result of [any] innately alluring or magnetic qualities’; they are the result of a ‘mediated persona’ (Evans and Hesmondhalgh, p. 19)

- Rise of the image in the twentieth century changed our perceptions of fame.
- ‘Graphic Revolution’ = The rise in mass-produced images
- ‘Pseudo-Event’ = an event staged for the main purpose of media coverage
- Modern celebrity is fabricated; it is a fiction
Considering Question 3: Why is the public attracted to celebrities?

There are at least three differing components to any celebrity’s persona:

1) The ‘real person’ - the personal identity that pre-exists the public’s perception of that celebrity.

2) The ‘screen presence’ – this is based on the characters or roles that the celebrity plays on screen (action hero, romantic comedian, girl-next-door)

3) The ‘public persona’ - what we come to know about a star or celebrity through newspapers, magazines, etc.
Three Faces of Victoria Beckham

Neurotic Wife

Happily Expectant Mother

Glamorous, Sexy Partner
Richard Dyer on Marilyn Monroe

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmCNj4i16BU
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzUqT0MCwdA
Why celebrities appeal to us – Ideas from Psychoanalysis

- Conscious/Unconscious -- Id/Ego -- Symbolic/Imaginary

- What we are *permitted* to do or have *vs.* What we *desire*

- Celebrities appear to have more access to what is desirable

- **Theoretical** = based on assumptions; educated guesses. Useful for exploring whole societies and time periods

- **Empirical** = based on the results of practical research. Useful for studies of specific audiences

- Both suggest that the allure of celebrity involves a desire for shared identity
Considering Question 4:
What does the changing nature of celebrity suggest about society?

- Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (2001)

- ‘A ubiquitous “living” form of celebrity which is powered by newspapers, magazines, and electronic mass media’.

- Three factors in the rise of celebrity culture:
  - Democratisation of Society
  - Decline of Organised Religion
  - Commodification of Everyday Life
Rojek’s Three Types of Celebrity

1) Ascribed Celebrity – celebrity status that is achieved through bloodline and biological descent

2) Achieved Celebrity – celebrity status that is the result of some form of accomplishment

3) Attributed Celebrity – celebrity as the result of representation by the mass media (‘famous for being famous’)

Critics such as Cowen and Gray suggest that the changing nature of celebrity is a natural end result of capitalism and democracy: a positive form of social levelling.

Boorstin and others see it as a deterioration of values and attributes such as hard work, moral substance, superior talent and intelligence, etc.
Truth or Fiction?

‘We can make a celebrity but we can’t make a hero’ – Daniel Boorstin, *The Image* (1961)

The only things we ‘know’ about any celebrity are *mediated* by the media

Is the image of any star just a representation, rather than a reality, that the media have constructed?
References: