

Review Essay

The Showman Theory of History

Loren Glass

Bluford Adams. *E Pluribus Barnum: The Great Showman and the Making of U.S. Popular Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

Joy S. Kasson. *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History*. Hill and Wang, 2000.

Since the establishment of the star system by the Hollywood film industry in the teens, celebrity has increasingly saturated public culture, informing both our sense of individual identity and our relations with others. Populating an ambiguous borderland between cultural fantasy and biographical reality, celebrities arguably define what personhood has become in the contemporary world. Until recently, however, celebrity attracted academic attention only to be dismissed as a sign of cultural decline. Historian Daniel Boorstin handily illustrated this condescension when, tracking the fall "From Hero to Celebrity," he defined the celebrity as "a person who is known for his well-knownness," a human pseudo-event (57). Correlatively, Frankfurt School critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno dismissed modern celebrity as a form of "pseudo individuality," one of the many weapons deployed by the culture industry to manipulate the masses into political passivity (154). Celebrities, according to this logic, are simply trivial and fictitious personalities manufactured by the dominant culture to distract us from our "real" lives. As

Loren Glass is Assistant Professor of American Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Iowa. His book *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880-1980* has just been published by New York University Press.

Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies 4 (Spring 2004)
Copyright © 2004 by the University of Iowa

the above examples illustrate, this elitist perspective spanned the political spectrum in the twentieth century, as academic and public intellectuals, in thrall to the assumption of what Andreas Huyssen called “the Great Divide” between modernism and mass culture, reduced the complexities and contradictions of celebrity to one overarching narrative of decadence and distraction.

This assumption has been challenged by the rise of cultural studies, emerging as it does in the postmodern eclipse of the division between high and low culture, and alongside the rise of high theory in the academy. Richard Dyer’s groundbreaking *Stars* affirmed celebrity as a legitimate object of academic study, arguing that stars provide crucial insight into fundamental ideologies of identity and difference in modern society. By marshalling a range of disciplinary methods, from Weberian sociology to semiotics to performance theory, Dyer established the study of celebrity as a sub-field of cultural studies. Since its original publication in 1979, *Stars* has become the standard reference, spawning a veritable growth industry in celebrity criticism (see, for example, Gledhill, Gamson, Braudy, Schickel, Ponce de Leon, and Decker).

This sub-field reached a certain maturity with P. David Marshall’s *Celebrity and Power*. Marshall effectively emplots the historical imbrication of capitalism and democracy that has given rise to the contemporary culture of celebrity, and usefully summarizes the theoretical methodologies that have proven useful for its analysis. He settles on a semiotic understanding of the culture of celebrity, in which “the celebrity sheds its own subjectivity and individuality and becomes an organizing structure for conventionalized meaning” (56). Consequently, “the denotative level of meaning of the celebrity is the empty structure of the material reality of the actual person” (57). This bracketing of the “material reality of the actual person” in turn becomes central to Marshall’s methodological approach to the analysis of the celebrity text.

Marshall and Dyer diverge from the earlier and more dismissive traditions of celebrity culture critique by granting power and agency to the audience. Marshall explicitly acknowledges that the emergence of cultural studies provides him with a method for understanding how “audience members actively work on the presentation of the celebrity in order to make it fit into their everyday lives” (47). However, both studies also reveal the degree to which the academic study of celebrity has emerged as a dialectical response to the popular obsession with the very “material reality of the actual person” that Marshall brackets as fundamentally “empty.” Marshall opens his study by essentially dismissing “popular studies of celebrity,” including celebrity autobiographies, as ideologically mystified attempts to “uncover the ‘real’ person behind the public persona” (4). His book then proceeds to illustrate how celebrity criticism can work to demystify the rhetoric of individualism that informs these more popular celebrity discourses. Even though they grant considerable agency to the audiences that make people famous, in ambivalently distrusting the fascination with individual specificity that undergirds this agency, both Dyer and Marshall still maintain Boorstin’s assumption that the celebrity is a “human pseudo-event.”

Dyer’s focus is the Hollywood star system, while Marshall focuses on the

industries of film, music, and television, in which the individual agency behind the celebrity persona is clearly vitiated, if not irrelevant. The enormous scale and scope of the corporate culture industries in relation to any discrete individual makes it easy to conceive of the “celebrity” as the product of an impersonal corporate system that responds to the needs of a rationally segmented set of audiences. Although both Dyer and Marshall concede the nineteenth century antecedents of contemporary celebrity culture, their studies focus on celebrity as a twentieth-century phenomenon linked to the rise of film and the corporate culture industries. Two recent books, however, Bluford Adams’s *E Pluribus Barnum* and Joy Kasson’s *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*, confirm the degree to which the mass cultural celebrity of the twentieth century—which we tend to associate with cinema, television, and recorded music—has its roots in the popular culture of the nineteenth century, before those technologies were invented. Adams and Kasson show us that celebrity emerged in the relatively disorganized and volatile popular amusements of the nineteenth century before it migrated into the more organized and stratified corporate culture industries of the twentieth.

They also both illustrate the degree to which our fascination with “the material reality of the actual person” continues to inform our attention to celebrity. The very choice to organize an entire study of popular culture around a specific individual testifies to the influence that individual had on the popular culture under consideration. Thus both studies are vexed by the problem of historical agency that is implicit in the organization of their texts. However, Adams and Kasson also reveal the degree to which a cultural studies approach offers a possible escape from the methodological impasse introduced by the problematic agency behind the generation of celebrity personae.

E Pluribus Barnum is promoted on its back cover as the “first book to consider the career of P.T. Barnum from a cultural studies perspective,” and certainly it illustrates the benefits to be reaped from bringing an interdisciplinary methodology to bear on a figure whose cultural and economic practices were so wide ranging. Adams considers the variety of venues in which Barnum forged his protean personality: the numerous autobiographies, the Jenny Lind Tour, the American Museum, the Lecture Room, and the hippodromes and circuses. Thus Adams must range from literary close readings to social history to ideological analysis to psychoanalytic film theory in order to render Barnum’s various incarnations culturally intelligible.

Adams organizes this kaleidoscopic combination of subject matter and analytical method around the problem of identity, not simply Barnum’s but, more significantly, the emerging middle-class audience to which he appealed. His first chapter on Barnum’s many autobiographies opens with the claim that “the simultaneous emergence of the U.S. middle class and Barnum was no accident” (2), and he proceeds to unpack the fascinating and frequently precarious ways in which the showman attempted to accommodate the fissions and contradictions of his audience through autobiographical representation and revision. According to Adams, Barnum exploited the protean power of celebrity through constructing “a series of autobiographical Barnums, personae that were crafted with care, worn for a period,

and eventually discarded when their style or politics no longer suited the showman's goals" (4). However, Adams also notes that "Barnum sometimes lost control over his public self once it found its way into the marketplace" (38). The opportunities of celebrity, then, are also its risks, as the power of public prominence simultaneously renders one susceptible to appropriation and reinterpretation.

Adams shows how Barnum struggled, through autobiographical narration, to transform his reputation as a huckster and conman into the impoverished beginnings of a respectable self-made man, thereby attempting to straddle plebeian and middle-class audiences. Furthermore, he was able to modulate his positions on race relations in order to accommodate the widest possible audience. Barnum's celebrity, in other words, wasn't just about aggrandizing himself; it was a mechanism whereby U.S. popular culture itself emerges as a negotiation of violent divisions over both race and class.

And, of course, gender, which is where Jenny Lind comes in. Adams devotes an entire chapter to her historic tour of the United States, in which Barnum attempted to promote her as an icon of true womanhood in order to deflect attention from the feminist implications of her public career. Barnum also used Lind, as Adams shows, to negotiate the emerging divide between high and low culture by having her sing both classical opera and traditional folk songs. According to Adams, the Lind "tour marked the emergence of the U.S. middle class as a cultural and commercial force," oriented around a feminized middlebrow culture that split the difference between the elites who criticized his popularizing animus and the plebeians who threatened his bourgeois respectability.

For this latter audience, Barnum would offer the American Museum, to which Adams dedicates another chapter. Here Barnum attempted to accommodate a variety of ethnic urban audiences by grounding his exhibits in a rhetoric of industrial discipline and domestic Christianity. The museum, in other words, innovated the idea of a family entertainment that worked to transcend ethnic and class divisions. Particularly fascinating in this regard were Barnum's controversial "baby shows," participatory events in which mothers entered their infants into competition for a variety of prizes. These shows, as Adams reveals, both championed and challenged nineteenth century domestic morality; they celebrated middle class maternity and motherhood, but also undermined the basic division between public and private life in which the ideology of true womanhood was based.

Barnum struggled with the ways in which the theatricality of U.S. popular culture both exposed and elided contradictions in nineteenth century moral discourse. The stakes of this struggle are well illustrated in Adams's chapter on the temperance and slavery dramas that Barnum staged in the Lecture Room of his museum. Exploiting the central moral controversies of his day, these performances were enormously popular, but they also threatened to divide his audience along political lines. As Adams shows, "Barnum worked to suture the splits in his audience by aligning patrons with temperance philanthropists and liberal slaveholders and against feminists and radical abolitionists" (117). Thus Barnum staged Moses Kimball's adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which omitted both Tom's martyrdom and George Harris's famous confrontation with his pursuers. Furthermore, he at-

tempted to vitiate the egalitarian implications of Stowe's text by simultaneously developing sensational exhibits based in scientific racism, such as the highly popular "What Is It?", promoted as the "connecting link between man and monkey" (158).

All of these vexed divisions along lines of race, class, and gender come together in Adams's final chapter on Barnum's circus ventures, in particular his effort to produce a spectacle displaying "specimens" of the world's races in The Congress of Nations and the Ethnological Congress. Adams delicately exposes the ambiguities of these projects, inviting as they did both identification with Asian monarchs and warriors and objectification of primitive exotic others. According to Adams, these ambiguities demonstrate "both the expansiveness and the inadequacy of race as a signifier of difference in the late nineteenth-century United States" (182). The strength of Adams study is in revealing how this very expansiveness and inadequacy, not only of race but of class and gender as well, is precisely what enabled Barnum, and the popular culture he innovated, to appeal to an audience divided along those shady lines.

Historically speaking, Joy Kasson's *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* picks up where *E Pluribus Barnum* leaves off. William F. Cody started his traveling show during the waning years of Barnum's career, exploiting many of the techniques of self promotion developed by the showman whose name had by now become a verb. As with Barnum, the variety of media and genres in which Buffalo Bill's story was told and retold solicits an interdisciplinary method, and Kasson skillfully complements her meticulous history with close readings of dime novels, playbills, and photographs, as well as sociological meditations on the relationship between personal performance and historical memory.

However, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* is more indebted than *E Pluribus Barnum* to the "myth and symbol" school of American studies and, as a result, Kasson is more sustained, and single-minded, than Adams in her thesis regarding the social function of her subject's celebrity. She opens by claiming that she intends "to examine the subtle interweaving of fact, fiction, hype, and audience desire. In Buffalo Bill's Wild West, historical events seemed to become personal memory, and personal memory was reinterpreted as national memory" (7). This blurring of the boundary between, on the one hand, fact and fiction, and, on the other, personal and national memory, provides the interpretive lens through which Kasson examines the Wild West show as it developed from small personal displays of horse-racing and buffalo shooting on the plains to a multi-million dollar extravaganza with hundreds of cast members (including many Native Americans), animals (both wild and domestic), and elaborately expensive sets and props.

Kasson splits her study into two parts, "Performances" and "Perspectives," allowing her to separate out the story of the show's development from her more general meditations on its cultural significance. Cody started out as an Army scout on the plains, and Kasson shows how his participation in the entertainment culture of the West "made frontier life inseparable from its embodiment as spectacle" (13). She also reveals the degree to which the agency behind this spectacle, from the very beginning, was as much corporate as personal. Buffalo Bill's early fame was

established by Beadle and Adams's dime novels, written by Edward Zane Carroll Judson under the pseudonym Ned Buntline; after he became world famous, Cody relied heavily on publicists and managers to promote and maintain his image. Like Barnum, he had to struggle to maintain control over his public persona.

Kasson tracks the Wild West show through Europe and America, from its amateur frontier origins to pride of place opposite the main entrance to the World Columbian Exposition, and finally to its late-career merger with Pawnee Bill's Historical Wild West, Mexican Hippodrome, Indian Museum, and Grand Fireworks Exhibition, which left Cody as little more than a figurehead in his waning years. Over the course of this fascinating story, Kasson reveals how the real experiences of William F. Cody gradually modulated into a dominating myth of the twentieth century United States. In the process, Buffalo Bill became a worldwide celebrity, and Kasson dwells somewhat more extensively than Adams on the struggles between private life and public role that inform the careers of celebrities in the modern era. Cody's financial difficulties, marital problems, and relations with partners all threatened the integrity of his public image, and Kasson illuminates the crucial terms of these struggles without falling into the trap of attempting to differentiate between the "real" biographical individual and his public incarnations. Rather, this tension between privacy and publicity would come to determine the nature of the celebrity as such, as a struggle over agency between audiences, publicists, the media, and the individual famous person.

It is with the question of agency that the meticulousness of Kasson's archival work and the deftness of her interpretive method bear the best fruits. Her most interesting chapter discusses the role of Native Americans in the Wild West show, and meditates on the degree to which they were able to determine the parts they played. American Indians were central to Buffalo Bill's show, and he used his considerable leverage with the U.S. government to obtain the services of already famous Indians who had only just been vanquished in the Indian wars. The most famous of these was, of course, Sitting Bull, by now a virtual prisoner of the U.S. government at the Standing Rock agency in the Dakota Territory. Kasson shows how joining the Wild West show provided Sitting Bull, as well as many other Native Americans, with the only mobility possible for them after their military defeat and confinement to reservations. Furthermore, she reveals how many of them were able to make both money and political contacts during their tours.

Indeed, advocates of Native American assimilation protested their use in the Wild West show as perpetuating their traditional way of life. In a painful paradox, Indians were able to maintain a connection to many of the hunting and military rituals of their past through performing them for modern non-native audiences. Kasson is careful to equivocate on how much agency they had in their entertainment careers, but she does argue, and establish convincingly, that "American Indians may have been viewed by both the Wild West management and the assimilationist reformers and government officials as the *object* of policy choices, but the resulting publicity allowed them to speak in ways that suggest how the issues appeared to them as *subjects* of their own stories" (187).

Kasson's concluding chapter focuses on the relationship between public spec-

tacle and historical memory, and here she convincingly argues that Buffalo Bill's celebrity managed to sanitize the genocidal, environmental, and internecine violence of America's recent past into a nostalgic memory of individual heroism and the battle between good and evil. In this conclusion, Kasson leans heavily on the American studies tradition that precedes her study, from Frederick Jackson Turner, whose talk on "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" was given at the same Columbian Exposition where Buffalo Bill was performing, up through Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and Richard Slotkin, whose foundational studies of the mythic role of the West in American history continue to cast a shadow over all subsequent work on the topic. Although Kasson is far more sensitive to dissidence and dissent than these earlier scholars, her focus on the role of myth in forging national memory testifies to their continuing influence.

E Pluribus Barnum and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* illustrate two interrelated strands of influence in U.S. cultural studies. By focusing more on the divisions and contradictions in Barnum's audience, Adams contributes to the ongoing adaptation of the methods and politics of British cultural studies to American popular culture; by focusing more on the consensus and continuity in Buffalo Bill's significance, Kasson testifies to the persistence of more traditional American studies scholarship in the same interdisciplinary terrain. This difference (which is also, arguably, a generational difference insofar as *E Pluribus Barnum* is Adams's first book while *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* is Kasson's third) between these scholars in turn foregrounds the fundamental ambiguity of their shared field of interest. As Stuart Hall famously established, popular culture is a battlefield between dominant and subordinate populations; these books remind us that the "winner" in this battle depends on the sensibilities of the scholar who takes it as his or her object of study.

In the case of celebrity culture, this problem is further complicated by the fact that the "battlefield" in question is also a biographical individual. In this sense, Both *E Pluribus Barnum* and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* illustrate a crucial methodological—and indeed philosophical—problem that is foregrounded by the phenomenon of celebrity: authorship. Organized as they are around the careers of prominent showmen who clearly worked hard to control the shape and scope of their public personae, both risk begging the question of individual agency, or even asserting a sort of great man theory of popular culture. Writing in the wake of the theoretical "death of the author," both texts seem to resurrect assumptions about agency and intention that have been heavily scrutinized by the very critics on whose work they (particularly Adams) rely. However, by applying a variety of methodological approaches to the varying social forces that contribute to the celebrity persona, *E Pluribus Barnum* and *Buffalo Bill's Wild West* also offer a tentative solution to this perennial problem: corporate authorship. Both Adams and Kasson illustrate how a wide range of institutions and individuals contribute to the celebrity personality, frequently in contradictory ways. And each source of agency solicits different methods: autobiographies benefit from close readings; audiences require reception theory; spectacles can be understood psychoanalytically; reviews and criticism can be analyzed sociologically in terms of the field of cultural

production. Together, these methods reveal celebrity as a corporate endeavor in which the biographical individual is only one player among many.

But he (or she) is a player, and Adams and Kasson's very decision to write sweeping historical narratives by way of individual stories seems to bespeak more than simple expedience. Popular culture presents a dizzying array of artifact and anecdote, and certainly focusing on one showman provides a convenient mechanism by which to narrow the field. But, more importantly, it shows how the dialectical tension between individual and social agency constitutes the meaning and appeal of celebrity culture as a central constituent of U.S. popular culture. These scholars, like the absent audiences whose needs and desires they ventriloquize, are interested in "the materiality of the actual person," even if such a person seems impossible to pin down.

The idea of corporate authorship also indicates a significant absence in both these studies: capitalism. Celebrity in the United States emerged in tandem with the rise of industrial and corporate capitalism; the culture of consumption whose foundations had been laid by the late nineteenth century required celebrities as a marketing mechanism. Their personalities were "corporate" not only in terms of the variety of social agencies that contributed to them, but also in terms of the economic imperatives that generated them. Adams and Kasson assume, rather than attend to, the complex relations between cultural and economic formations that made celebrity not only possible, but necessary. Their stories are fascinating, their research is impeccable, and their analysis is convincing, but it's hard not to feel that they have neglected the economic context that solicits such stories, supplies such archives, and enables such modes of analysis in the first place.

Works Cited

- Boorstin, Daniel. *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Atheneum, 1973.
- Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. New York: Vintage, 1986.
- Decker, Jeffrey Louis. *Made In America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. London: British Film Institute, 1979.
- Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Gledhill, Christine, ed. *Stardom: Industry of Desire*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Trans. John Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1972.
- Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
- Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Ponce de Leon, Charles L. *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.
- Schickel, Richard. *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity*. New York: Doubleday, 1985.