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# SHOT AT FAME

BY RUSSELL SMITH

**How photography stoked  
the star-making machinery of celebrity**



**B**efore we had celebrities we had the merely famous. Albert Einstein, photographed by Martin Höhlig for the society magazine *Vanity Fair* in 1923, was famous for his scientific theories. His dusty, even slightly frayed, felt suit is meant to convey sobriety rather than glamour; he is posed against a wall of books to suggest his learning. Einstein's private life was not discussed in the tabloids of the time, and newspaper reports would not have referred to him as Albert or any diminutive thereof.

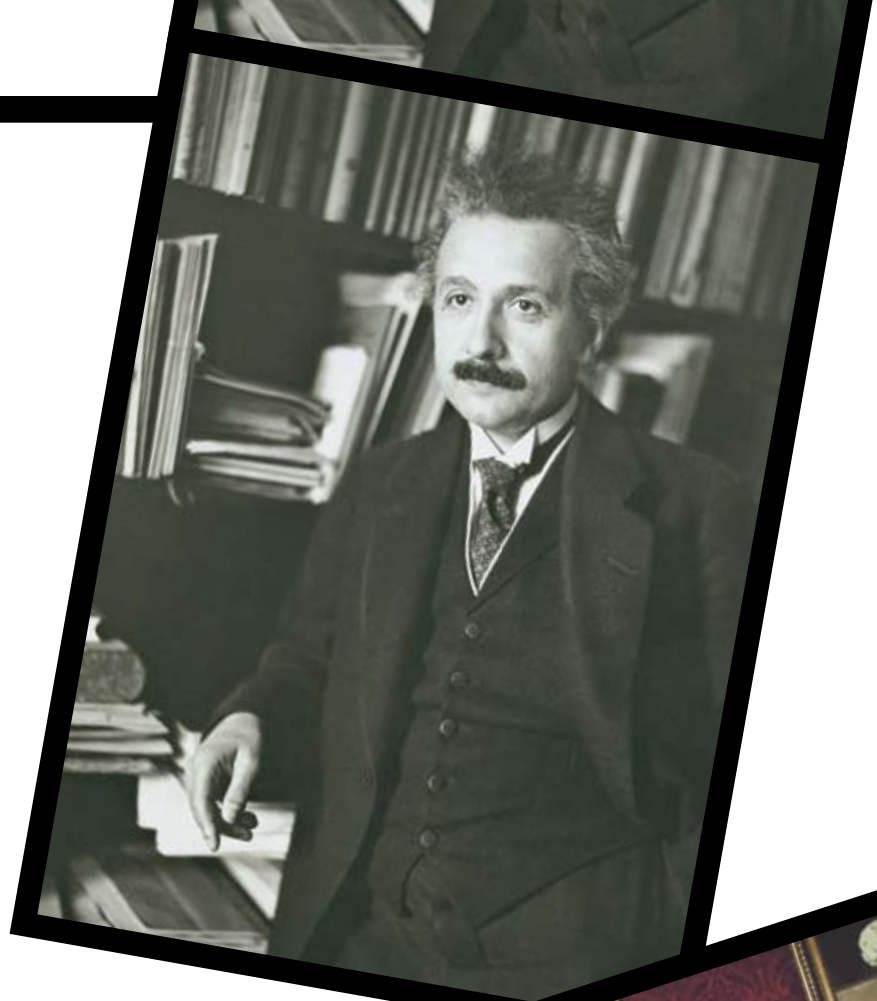
Buckminster Fuller, the modernist architect, appears in the magazine nine years later in similarly ecclesiastical attire, staring at a large model of one of his futuristic works. His accomplishment occupies more of the frame than he does.

This is fame: it comes from something you've done.

D. H. Lawrence makes the pages of the glamorous society magazine in 1924—looking murderously gloomy—for the novels that he has written. Six French modernist composers appear in 1921 because of the innovative quality of their works. They were not, at this time, particularly wealthy or inaccessible people. Even Lawrence was not judged to be someone whose VIP lounge one dearly wanted into. You did not have yourself photographed beside D. H. Lawrence as if next to a monument.

And yet photography—and the fact that the famous became more famous by being photographed—is central to the creation of celebrity as we know it today, the celebrity that comes after fame: the celebrity that comes from being famous. The history of photography and the history of celebrity are intertwined.

Historians argue over who was the first figure to achieve this kind of fame. A case can be made for Mary Pickford, the Canadian-born silent-movie star whose image and imagined personality developed a certain revered value independent of her acting. Rudolph Valentino became a symbol, after he died, of something he never was—of some sort of perfection, or of his fans' lost youth; what he was varied according to his worshipper, which is key to the concept. My own vote goes to Charles Lindbergh, the aviator. The hysteria that developed after he completed his 1927 trans-Atlantic flight arose from his accomplishment, and yet it rapidly turned into the kind of autograph-seeking, magic-generating, god-creating power that eclipsed his original achieve-



ment. It became about him, himself; it lifted him above common humanity, yet turned him into someone people thought they knew. And the hysteria was, for the first time, international.

This is the thing about celebrity: it's a blank screen for our projections. People think they know celebrities, even intimately. Celebrities represent exaggerated aspects of ourselves, whether of perfection or failure, a human ideal. They are something like polytheist's gods. And that divine essence, we feel, will rub off on us in their presence.

Photography, like celebrity, has also been thought to have a magic power: the power to penetrate, to steal your soul. Photographs themselves, the physical objects, become magic to us: we keep our old prints even when they fade and curl, because to part with them is to part with a physical connection to their subjects. (When Michael Jackson died, how many commentators mentioned their childhood memories of keeping and kissing his photograph?)

Roland Barthes wrote once of the photograph as a "bizarre medium"—medium not in the contemporary sense of media, but in the mystical realm as a transmitter of spirits, of life from beyond.

Portrait photography was once so expensive it might as well have been magic. Which is why it has, from its very inception, been associated pri-

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marily with the famous. And that's why photography was seminal in the creation of celebrity as we now know it. In the United States—surely the world's most proficient society in the export of this commodity—the first big exhibitions of portrait photography in the mid-19th century were hosted by commercial photography studios such as the influential Southworth & Hawes of Boston, home to the bluebloods. They displayed portraits of the privileged and notable. The deal was this: the famous person got a free print of the shot, and the studio got the right to display another copy of it in the shop window, drumming up more business from the rest of us. Thus one's social status was made concrete by photography. (Exactly the same point was made of *Vanity Fair* in its second incarnation, 150 years later: the *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd wrote, "Getting your own photo shoot in *Vanity Fair* has become the premier achievement in our celebrity-mad culture.")

Southworth & Hawes were important because they proclaimed photography to be a form of art. In the 1800s, the case was yet far from proved. There was still a sense that photography was a kind of scientific truth, a chemical recording with no element of interpretation. A critic of an exhibition of daguerrotypes in Russia in 1839 wrote: "The daguerrotype is a useless means of making portraits . . . [because] mathematical verisimilitude and lifeless precision do not do justice to a portrait, for which one needs expression and life; these can only be conveyed by the animating strength of talent and thought of an individual: no machine can do this."

In England, the author and art critic Lady Elizabeth Eastlake wrote of photography in 1857 that it was a mere part of the modern "craving or rather necessity for cheap, prompt and correct facts." A fact is here opposed to art: the two cannot coexist.

A position somewhere between nature and culture is suggested by the very word photography, a word used as an umbrella term from the very first technology of this sort: it first surfaced in France in 1834 and then was independently coined in England and Germany in 1839. (In England, the word was first presented in a lecture at the Royal Society, eventually winning out over its contemporary rivals *photogene* and *heliograph*.) The philosopher Geoffrey Batchen remarks that the combination of *photos*, light—which is purely nature, the sun, God—and *graphein*, writing—which is purely human, purely constructed, pure artifice—is paradoxical: he calls it an "impossible binary opposition."

Enter modern art, to drag photography, sometimes violently, from the laboratory and dump it squarely into the camp of culture. By the 1920s—after cubism had exploded all notions of representation—surrealism had embraced photography as unequivocally artistic, and photography has contained some element of surrealism ever since. The editors of *Vanity Fair* were proponents of modernism in all its forms, both technological and psychic. For them to have



**Previous:**  
Outtake of  
Noel Coward with  
cigarette.  
November 1932.  
By Edward  
Steichen.

**Top:** Albert Einstein.  
By Martin Höhlig.

**Middle:**  
Hollywood cover.  
By Annie Leibovitz.  
©Annie Leibovitz/  
Courtesy of the  
artist.

**Left:**  
D. H. Lawrence.  
January 1924.  
By Nickolas Muray.

**Here is how the famous people in *Vanity Fair* have changed: we are looking now mostly at their roles. And that's what we want from celebrity: we want roles.**

published, in 1930, Steichen's photo of the Asian-American movie star Anna May Wong, her head floating as if disembodied, next to a head-sized flower, in a clear reference to Brancusi's futurist sculpture *Sleeping Muse*— well, that would have been fairly daring.

It was in the '20s and '30s that the idea of photograph as amplified or stylized reality was born. Man Ray, assigned to shoot the choreographer Bronislava Nijinska (the dancer's sister), paints her face into a cubist mask and doubles it on the page, making faces into paintings, icons of angst—and of theatricality itself.

Perhaps in part because of their famous subjects, photographers started to be seen as great artists, as expressionist painters in black and white, and it's their names we remember: Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Imogen Cunningham, Charles Sheeler. And it's at this time that we start to see movie stars photographed with props and in stage sets: W.C. Fields as a sleepy hobo; Peter Lorre as a villain facing a crowd of anonymous accusers; Paul Robeson as a mistrustful emperor. The point of these photos is not to reveal a personality, to present a true inner self (as Steichen was perhaps attempting to do with his shadowy portrait of an arch Noel Coward in 1932), but to play on the roles these actors played. These are portraits—nudging portraits, winking at the viewer—not of souls but of masks.

*Vanity Fair* died in 1936 and was reinvented in 1983 as a natural-seeming mix of politics, argument and personality profiles, exactly at a time when cultural critics were most vocally beginning to criticize the great American engines of celebrity. It was in the '70s and '80s—when Farrah Fawcett's swimsuit photo, on every



boy's closet door, had become the image that would almost single-handedly define not only her, but a decade, forever—that a questioning murmur arose on university campuses and in the left-wing press. Photography, being the principal weapon of advertising, had come to represent both the mass media and the dreamlike experience of living in a world of images, of representations. *Vanity Fair*, although a serious forum for investigative reporting, was also a powerful promoter of the celebrity image. And we all began to have that uneasy sense that all reality was being mediated by photographs.

The photographer who has come to exemplify the lush *Vanity Fair* style is of course Annie Leibovitz, who began her career as a gritty photojournalist, but who is also capable of constructing the greatest air of theatre, satire, or artificiality about her portraits. Leibovitz mixes candid shots with dreamlike renderings that can be as much about roles as souls. George Clooney, dressed as a film director of the '20s, commanding a flock of naked water nymphs on a raft-like stage—an elaborate piece of theatre, actually—is here a reference not only to Clooney's status as heartthrob, but also to Hollywood past, to the aggrandizement and intermingling of image and artifice. There is deep irony here: irony about celebrity while manufacturing celebrity.

Here is how the famous people in *Vanity Fair* have changed: we are looking now mostly at their roles. And that's what we want from celebrity: we want roles. Leibovitz's irony is the irony of the age: we now know in our jaded wisdom that images are all mediations, that representations are all of other representations, and still they are god-like to us.

Here's Roland Barthes again, writing from the relative naivety of 1980: "What characterizes the so-called advanced societies is that they today consume images and no longer, like those of the past, beliefs." He sounds rather earnest. What, a contemporary might ask, is the difference? o



Left: Madonna, 1996. By Mario Testino. ©Mario Testino.

Upper right: Anna May Wong, 1930. By Edward Steichen. ©Condé Nast Publications Inc./ Courtesy Condé Nast Archive.