

Celebrity in Contemporary Culture

Lewis Lapham

Fourth Annual Eva Holtby Lecture on Contemporary Culture

Institute for Contemporary Culture at the Royal Ontario Museum

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[Podcast begins with ROM sound sting]

Ron Graham, Chairman of the Board, Institute for Contemporary

Culture: Good evening, ladies and gentleman. My name is Ron Graham and it's my honour to serve as the chair of the Institute for Contemporary Culture at the ROM. Welcome to the fourth annual Eva Holtby lecture on contemporary culture. We are again grateful to Philip Holtby and his family for their vision and generosity in endowing this lecture series in memory of Eva and we welcome them here and their guests tonight.

Four years ago, when I introduced the first Holtby lecture with Adam Gopnik, I felt it necessary to go on at length about the ICC—who we were, what we were hoping to accomplish, even where we were located. I like to think that's unnecessary now, particularly with this audience of so many friends and supporters. In fact, this is by far, the largest turnout for a Holtby lecture and the price of our success is an overflow crowd. We apologize to those who are in the lunch room watching this on television and we apologize even more to the many dozens of people we had to turn away tonight. We'll try to get that better next year.

Year by year, through our exhibitions and our programming, from Garaicoa and Sugimoto, from aboriginal artists in Canada to video artists in Shanghai, from looking at homelessness through graffiti art to looking at celebrity through *Vanity Fair* magazine and the portraits of Nigel Dickson, we have become known to a broad and diverse audience as the ROM's window on the contemporary world and on the social and cultural issues of today. We hope to do more, better, of course.

We have two extraordinary exhibitions in the works and many, many more ideas. So please join us, if you haven't already, either as a friend of the ICC, or simply by sending us your email.

Nothing has contributed more to our reputation than the distinguished Holtby lecture. As you know, our intention at the ICC is not just to present exhibitions in

our gallery, but to use them as springboards for discussion and thought. And though the Holtby lecture is not always linked to what we're showing upstairs, we wanted to use this year's to bring vigorous, provocative insight into the question of celebrity in our own culture.

I should perhaps warn you, before we go any further that three weeks ago, we were addressed by Meryl Streep. At the end, one of the questions from the audience was, "Ms. Streep, can I have a hug?" *[Crowd laughs]*

I'm not sure if tonight's guest will reciprocate the way she did. *[Crowd laughs]*

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to introduce Francisco Alvarez, the Managing Director of the ICC, who will introduce tonight's speaker.

[Sound of applause]

Francisco Alvarez, Managing Director, ICC: Good evening ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the annual Eva Holtby lecture.

There's been a lot of confusion, we've never had this much demand for seats and of course seats were free, we've just been seating people in our overflow room, there's probably 75 or 80 people in there.

Anyway, it is my great pleasure to introduce our speaker tonight, Lewis Lapham. Lewis is a San Francisco native who is a graduate of Yale and Cambridge University and was the editor of *Harper's Magazine* between 1976 and '81 and again between 1983 and 2006. He is the author of many books—thirteen to my count so far—the most recent being, *Pretensions to Empire: Notes on the Criminal Folly of the Bush Administration*.

Over the years, many people have commented on his work. The *New York Times* likened him to H.L. Mencken; *Vanity Fair* noticed a strong resemblance to Mark Twain and Tom Wolfe compared him to Montaigne. He is the recipient of numerous awards, currently he edits the...he founded and edits *Lapham Quarterly*, a journal devoted to literature, history and ideas. And um...finally, he is also the author of a documentary film called *The American Ruling Class* and um...has been the host and author of the PBS series *America's Century* and also, the series, *Bookmark*. So Ladies and Gentlemen, please welcome Lewis Lapham to the stage.

[Sound of applause]

Lewis Lapham: I'm honoured to be here and honoured to give the Holtby lecture and I thank Ron Graham and Francisco Alvarez for the handsome introduction.

The YMHA on East 92nd Street in New York fancies itself the centre ring of the city's cultural circus, and two months ago I was asked by one of its booking agents to round up participants—an author, an actress, possibly a musician or a film director—for a discussion about the role of the artist in American society. I suggested the names of ten or twelve individuals whose work I admired and on whom I could count to say something of interest. Not one of them was deemed to be sufficiently well known [*quiet laughter*]. What they maybe had to say was of no consequence. What mattered was the degree of their celebrity, and the names on my list were rated as meagreonyms, unbaptised in the fonts of A-list publicity. Low burning flames unlikely to attract a crowd of moths [*Sound of laughter*].

I can't say that I was surprised. The judgment was in keeping with the spirit of the times, in line with the worship of celebrity that constitutes the DNA of America's artistic expression and embodies the bulk of its religious sentiment. On being told that none of my candidates met the requirements for admission to the Mount Parnassus on East 92nd Street [*sound of laughter*] I was reminded of Cicero on his return to the Bay of Naples in 74 B.C.

Cicero, at the time, was an upwardly mobile politician who had served with some distinction as a Roman magistrate in Sicily, and he expected to be received with a show of appreciation and applause by the bold-faced names assembled for the summer season at the seaside resort in those days equivalent to Nantucket or Cap d'Antibes. The few people who recognized him didn't know or care that he had been out of touch. His name was on nobody's tongue, and a blow to his vanity from which he sought to recover in a letter to a friend. "Once I had realized that the Roman people was rather deaf, but sharp-eyed, I stopped worrying about what the world heard about me. From that day I took care to be seen in person every day. I lived in the public eye and was always in the Forum."

The lesson was the same one taught by Gore Vidal in the late 1960s to a young writer who had asked for advice about advancing his literary career. "Never miss the chance," said Vidal, "to have sex or appear on television."

[*Sound of laughter*]

As I'm sure I don't need to remind anybody in this room, Marshall McLuhan highlighted the same power point forty-five years ago in his treatise remarking on the ways in which the electronic media had overwhelmed the idiom of print. McLuhan didn't live to see the advent of the Internet or the cell phone or the current exhibit in the Royal Ontario Museum, but he understood that the old religious theatre in which Poseidon and Zeus once staged cataclysmic floods and heavenly fires had been replaced by the theatre of celebrity, the repertory company of high-definition personalities lending themselves more readily to the traffic in dreams and incantations than to the distributions of coherent argument.

The enclosed and mediated spaces in which most of us now live most of our lives McLuhan identified as the "Pool of Narcissus"—the world in which the time is always now, if not on channel 4 in New York or Los Angeles, then on channels 27 or 41 in London and Rangoon. The accelerated speeds of transmission bear us backwards, literally at the speed of light, into a pagan and prehistoric past, into the enchanted garden of the Eternal Present in which John F. Kennedy is still the king in Camelot, Eva Peron is a model for Yves Saint Laurent and a friend of Andrew Lloyd Webber, and Jane Austen is forever riding in a carriage on the road to Bath [*Laughter*]. Whether in Hollywood restaurants or Washington hearing rooms, names take precedence over things, the actor over the act. Celebrity is about being, not becoming. Like the moon acting upon the movement of the tides, the images of wealth and power call forth collective surges of emotion that rise and fall with as little apparent meaning as the surf breaking on the beach in Santa Monica. Because the camera sees but doesn't think, the content doesn't matter. What matters is the volume of emotion and the flood of consciousness, as happily directed toward a bloodbath in Afghanistan as toward a bubble bath in Paris. So insistent has become the presence of these images that people find it easy to imagine celebrities forever enthroned in a 24/7 talk show on Mount Olympus, Henry Kissinger exchanging views with the Nike Swoosh, Bill Gates in conference with the Ralph Lauren Polo player. It doesn't matter that they say nothing of interest or importance. Neither did Aphrodite or Dionysius. The being in the know is a matter of instantly recognizing icons (as many as 12,000 of them in the course of an afternoon's shopping and an evening's programming) which demand nothing of their votaries except the duty of ritual observance. One understands that the United States Senate is not a golf ball, that Versace is a dress.

Just as the ancient Greeks assigned trace elements of the divine to trees and winds and stones (the river god sulked and the child drowned; the sky god smiled and the corn ripened), so also in the contemporary scheme of things celebrities of various magnitude show up on screen breathing the gift of life into pick-up trucks

and prescriptions for Viagra. Dowager movie queens awaken with their personal touch the spirit dormant in the color of a lipstick or a bottle of perfume.

The postmodern imagination is a product of the electronic media, but as a means of perception, it is pre-Christian. McLuhan advanced the proposition in 1964, but it was another thirty years before I knew I'd seen his word made flesh. O. J. Simpson's white Ford Bronco was proceeding majestically north on the San Diego freeway under a royal umbrella of helicopters, and well before the procession moved through the Santa Monica Interchange, reverent crowds were gathering under the eucalyptus trees to pay homage to the presence of divinity descended from the starry heavens of prime-time television—a demigod on the order of the doomed Orestes in flight from the pursuing Furies. The Greek chorus standing by the side of the road held up signs saying FREE THE JUICE while at the same time open to the transcendent possibility that Simpson might shoot himself in the head. As McLuhan had gone to no small trouble to explain, it was the medium that was the message, not the thing that was done or said.

By the time the last of the California twilight had faded from the courtyard in Brentwood, at least eight channels were showing live footage of a parked car imbued with the excitements of the Persian Gulf War. The network correspondents airborne overhead knew that they were looking at very, very big news, but they didn't know what it was supposed to mean. Surely there had to be more to the story than free-range spectacle and brute sensation, something that could be dressed up in the costume of a civilized message about professional sports or the predicament of women. They looked for guidance to the wisdom of their anchor desks, but the *magister ludi* in New York, among them Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather and the late Peter Jennings were as much at a loss for words as the distant members of the global village in Zanzibar and Tierra del Fuego.

Two days later, Jennings said to one of his peers at the *Washington Post* "At moments like that we are reduced to roughly the same level as that of the audience." [*Sound of laughter*]. A. M. Rosenthal, A. M. Rosenthal, a *New York Times* columnist accustomed to the company of statesmen, asked himself in print, "Are we journalists or garbage collectors?"

The two professions have a lot in common [*sound of laughter*]. Celebrity sells newspapers, and the manufacture of the commodity, if necessary out of empty beer cans, orange rinds and egg shells, is the business of the news and entertainment media. The worthlessness of the material doesn't diminish the power of the finished product. That's why Paris Hilton can charge \$100,000 to open a restaurant or Uma Thurman can be paid \$20,000 to walk thirty feet on a red

carpet into a new restaurant. Also why...the British royal family, rents at various prices to American corporations that want one or another representatives of royalty at their annual meetings in London.

William Hazlitt made the point in an essay on the spirit of monarchy that he published in 1823, "The dream-buying public," he said, "makes kings of men and gods with pasteboard and painted wood, because it wants a peg or loop to hang its idle fancies on, something that displays its own vanity and pride in their most extravagant dimensions, the self-love and darling passion of its breast embodied in the first object it can lay its hands on. The less of real superiority or excellence in the person we fix upon as our proxy," Hazlitt said, "the more easily we can fancy ourselves as good as he. An idol is not the worse for being made of course materials, better for not being superior because then dependent on our own bounty and caprice."

Under the dispensation of the electronic, media commodities acquire the character of information, and the amassment of wealth comes to depend on the naming of things rather than the making of things. The subject transformed into an object, a brand name enjoying the privileges of a corporation, granted the license to conduct itself, as did Rousseau's noble savage at play in the fields of the Id, in outrageous and extravagant dimension.

The bargain is a Faustian one. In return for the making of the celebrity, for admission to the sacred grove, the celebrity becomes a burnt offering on the altars of publicity. The remnant of his or her humanity available to the rituals of the public feast.

Similar terms of endearment were well known to the very ancient Greeks, who allowed their sacred kings to rule in Thebes for a single triumphant year before putting them to death in order that their blood might fructify the crops and fields. Robert Graves in his rendering of the *Greek Myths* enumerates the several forms of the customary sacrifice known to the editors of the *National Enquirer* and *Entertainment Weekly* and visited upon, among others, Michael Jackson, Bill Clinton, Richard Nixon, Eliot Spitzer, Britney Spears and Anna Nicole Smith. "The ritual death," says Graves, "varied greatly in circumstance; the sacred king might be torn to pieces by wild women, transfixed with a stinging spear, felled with an axe, flung over a cliff, burned to death on a pyre, drowned in a pool, or killed in a pre-arranged chariot crash. But die he must."

And we do the same thing with our celebrities. They're a manufactured commodity, meant to be...ah, sold in supermarkets with the canned soup. And they...are consumed. They are disposable.

The best example in recent memory, is Diana, Princess of Wales, died in Paris shortly before dawn on August 31, 1997, and less than an hour later in Capetown, South Africa, heralds of the Olympian news media appealed to her brother, Charles, 9th Earl of Spencer, for a sound bite of farm-fresh grief. Instead of supplying the standard sentiment, Lord Spencer said he always knew that "the press would kill her in the end." He went on to say that "...every proprietor and editor of every publication that has paid for intrusive and exploitative photographs of her, encouraging greedy and ruthless individuals to risk everything in pursuit of Diana's image, has blood on their hands today."

The Earl knew whereof he spoke. Having once worked as a correspondent for NBC in London, he would have guessed that in Tokyo and New York the news media already had begun to cut and paste his dead sister into strips of videotape and fillets of 12-point type. Diana was a celebrity of the most vulnerable and therefore the most nourishing type, a victim for all seasons whom her brother memorialized in his eulogy as "a very insecure person," marked by her "deep feelings of unworthiness." She accepted the media's bargain with the pathetic gratitude of a born non-entity, avid for the limelight because she hoped to find the needle of her self in the haystack of her press clippings. Together with her brilliant smile and the appearance of having been granted every wish available in Aladdin's lamp—youth, beauty, pretty dresses, a prince for a husband, Elton John for a pet [*sound of laughter*]—she projected a sense of loneliness and loss. Her fans cherished her for her neediness, which was as desperate and as formless as their own. It proves to...speaks to Hazlitt's point about the...celebrity being manufactured out of poor material.

Maybe the Earl also remembered something of his reading of the Homeric poems. He had attended Eton and Oxford, two schools still acquainted with the study of classical antiquity, and it's conceivable that he had in mind a sacrificial feast not unlike the one that Nestor, king in Pylos, dedicated to the worship of Zeus' daughter, bright-eyed Pallas Athena. As described in the third book of the *Odyssey*, the ritual required the slaughter of "a yearling heifer/broad in the brow, unbroken, never yoked by men." Nestor instructs his goldsmith, skilled Laertes, to "come and sheathe the heifer's horns in gold," and then, after pouring the lustral water and scattering the barley meal, noble Pisistratus slashes the heifer's throat:

Dark blood gushed forth, life ebbed from her limbs—

they quartered her quickly, cut the thighbones out
and all according to custom wrapped
them round in fat,
and over the fires poured out glistening
wine.

Once they'd burned the bones and taste-
ed the organs,
they sliced the rest into pieces, spitted
them on skewers,
broiled all
the meats.

Which, most things considered and other things being equal, is what became of Diana, Princess of Wales. There were, of course, refinements. Over the last 3,000 years we've improved upon the old ways of broiling the meats and arranging their distribution to the supplicants crowding around the blood. Skilled Laertes is not one but many, and before noon on the day of Diana's death, a thousand gossip columnists had spitted her memory on skewers of solid-gold cliché. By nightfall the television producers assembling two and three-hour special programs had wrapped round in fat the pieces of what had been her life—Diana carrying a black child or riding a white horse, Diana in the harbour at St. Tropez on a Egyptian's gilded barge. At the hour of the rising moon it remained only for the anchorpersons, Jennings once again among them, to step forward into the studio light and pour out the wine of glistening bathos. Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer periodically interrupted their complacent sucking of the marrow from the bones of wonderful, wonderful Diana to say something about a lunch at The Four Seasons or a dress by Valentino.

It didn't matter what anybody said because even the bearers of the most intimate witness were talking not about a human being but about a golden mask behind which they were welcome to imagine the presence of Aphrodite Urania, Queen Elizabeth I, or Snow White.

Transfer the worship of celebrity into the realm of politics, and the vesting of authority in institutions gives way to the vesting of authority in persons. A government of men as opposed to a government of laws. The emphasis on the transfiguring power of personality runs counter to the idea of civilization, which defines itself as an advance—toward a system of justice that doesn't depend on the whim of a despot, toward a conception of art that rests on something other than the cost of diamonds on Damien Hirst's sculpture of the Golden Calf. Einstein once remarked that the beauty as well as the utility of science consists precisely in

its impersonality. Of Newton's *Principia* it is impossible for the critics to say, that because they really don't care very much for Newton, the laws of motion deserve a bad review [*Sound of laughter*].

The less that people understand what it is that politicians do, the more compelling the need to clothe them in the costumes of divinity. Who can bear the thought of being governed by human beings, by people as confused and imperfect as oneself? The identity of the state comes to be embodied in a small repertory company of individuals dressed up by the media in the wardrobe of immortality and elected to the office of a totem pole. Barbara Walters struck the appropriate note of subservience in the course of interviewing the newly-elected Jimmy Carter in the autumn of 1976.

"Be kind to us Mr. President," she said, "be good to us."

[*Sound of quiet laughter and murmurs from the audience*]

Not a request addressed by a fellow citizen to a Republican magistrate, but, as with the begging of an autograph from Tiger Woods, the propitiation of a god. Politicians seeking the office of the President of the United States aspire to become celebrities, to meet the specifications indicated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau—figures capable of walking into a room and seizing the universal approbation of everyone present, to focus on themselves all eyes, all praise, all sexual feeling.

Election campaigns borrow their plot lines from the medieval chronicles telling of Christian knights sent forth to recover bits and pieces of the True Cross. The man who would be president must endure the ordeal by klieg light and wander for many days and nights in a labyrinth of Holiday Inns, answering, in twenty words or less, questions that can't be answered in ten or twenty thousand. The presidency undoubtedly constitutes a fearful test of a man's capacities, but his capacities for what? Even if the electorate understood or cared about the tedious business of government, how does it choose between the rivals for its fealty and esteem? The one attribute—attribute that can be known and seen comes to stand for all the other attributes that remain invisible, and so the test becomes one of finding out who can survive the stupidity and pitiless lizard-stare of the television camera. Narrative becomes montage, gossip a substitute for the more demanding forms of political discussion, the affairs of state reduced to a matter of who said what to whom on the way into a summit conference or out of a men's room.

We have the...very spectacular example in the United States, the moment of Obama, who is a...celebrity, and elected as a messiah, elected to redeem the

country, not to govern it. The same reasons he was given the Nobel Peace Prize, not for the accomplishment but for his being, not his becoming.

But to say that Obama is an incompetent president is like saying that Tom Cruise can't act or that Madonna can't sing. The observation is beside the point. What was once a subject has become an object, no longer capable of error or human speech, imparting a sense of stability and calm to audiences terrified by the chaos of contingent event. The headlines bring word of war in Iraq, famine in Somalia, and banditry in Washington, but on the smooth and reassuring surfaces of our virtual reality (on a magazine cover or a television screen), the greater images of celebrity remain as steady in their courses as the fixed stars, as serene as the bronze Buddha in the courtyard at Kamakura. There they all are, Elvis and the Kennedys, Marilyn Monroe and Barack Obama together with Jane Austen, forever riding in a carriage on the road to Bath [*sound of quiet laughter*—bestowing upon the faithful the smiles of reassurance and infinite bliss. American idols, made of eggshells and orange rinds, they relieve the pain of living and hold at bay the fear of death.

Thank you.

[*Sound of applause*]

William Thorsell, Director & CEO, Royal Ontario Museum: Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen and welcome to the ROM. Thank you for your presence and interest here tonight. And, this is just the beginning of a conversation and it is my pleasure to introduce to you our conversants...ah with Mr. Lapham here this evening.

First Sarah Hampson, a journalist who began her career here in 1993 as a freelance contributor to *Toronto Life*, *Report on Business*, *Chatelaine* and *Saturday Night Magazine*, where she won several national magazine awards, including three Golds. In 1990 the *Globe and Mail* invited her to write a weekly interview column, which I'm sure you're familiar with, which still runs today and now numbers more than 500 individuals. She has talked to a wide variety of exotic people and is famous for getting under the veneer of their fame or celebrity personality to understand something of the motivation and nature of their subjects.

Sarah Hampson writes in the *Globe's* Life Section on a stimulating variety of topics about how we negotiate our daily lives. Her book about mid-life divorce, *A Place to Land*, will be published by Knopf next spring and I suspect that many of you will

be reading it. I hope not—maybe you will. Ladies and Gentlemen, our first conversant, Sarah Hampson.

[Sound of applause]

Don McKellar is a writer, a director and actor widely known to Canadian film-goers. He was the screenwriter of *Roadkill* and *Highway 61*, early icons of Canadian feature-filmmaking, and co-writer of *Dance Me Outside*, the Genie-award-winning *Thirty-two Short Films about Glenn Gould* and *The Red Violin*. He received a Genie award as best supporting actor in Adam McGoyan's *Exotica* and the Prix de la Jeunesse at Cannes for his directorial debut, *Last Night*. Many of you will know Don McKellar for his writing of the musical, *The Drowsy Chaperone*, for which he won a Tony award. He continues to be very active indeed, as an actor and an intellectual in Canadian film and television and artistic life. Ladies and Gentlemen, Don McKellar.

[Sound of applause]

Murray Pomerance is a professor in the Department of Sociology and Director of the Media Studies Working Group at Ryerson University. Professor Pomerance has written widely indeed on film, including *Johnny Depp Starts Here*, *An Eye for Hitchcock*, and *The Horse who Drank the Sky: Film Experience Beyond Narrative and Theory*. He is also a writer of fiction, notably, *Savage Time*, an editor and has even appeared on Broadway, I am told, in conjunction with a performance of *The 39 Steps*. Clearly a master of several and many trades, and probably a master of all. Ladies and Gentlemen, Murray Pomerance.

[Sound of applause]

Now while we're getting suited up with mics here, the occasion of *Vanity Fair* portraits and Nigel Dickson portraits here at the ROM has elicited from us this question about the nature of celebrity. If you look at the *Vanity Fair* installation upstairs, the first iteration of the magazine from the teens to the 1930s broken then from 1980s to now, you can see a big change, what we call vintage *Vanity Fair* on one side, and who are the subject matter of those photos. In those early photos you see the world's leading, Europe's leading writers, thinkers, authors, playwrights, scientists, and one has the sense that *Vanity Fair* magazine was there to introduce its readership to an elevated sense of what the world should be and who was important in the world from that point of view. The latter iteration of *Vanity Fair*, these wonderful portraits we see of the current world of celebrity does not, is not so represented by great writers, great thinkers, scientists, if you look at

those ah...pictures, or even politicians. It is more of the celebrity um...that one might suggest is shorter in its term and perhaps lighter in its weight than that of the earlier versions of *Vanity Fair*...And so, I'm going to ask Sarah Hampson to launch into the nice conversation in the context of this question of celebrity, how does it change, and I suppose in one point, why we need it so much. Is celebrity there because of our demand for it? Why is it when Meryl Streep comes to the ROM, ah...there is almost an electric feel of being close to something we otherwise feel we cannot touch? Ah...Sarah, thank you for being here.

Sarah Hampson: Well, one of the things I thought was interesting about what um, Mr. Lapham was saying, was about how these are, sort of the gods and goddesses, if you will, of...of modern society...and I would argue that they are icons, but also, there are so many anti-icons too and that we're interested in them not just because we um...want to follow them but we want to see them you know, be there—victimize themselves too. So I wonder whether you know, in what Mr. Lapham said, did you feel that um...that they are victims often, as Diana was, but she also was complicit in that victimhood, and...and so I wonder if that's something you've thought about as well?

Lewis Lapham: Well, it is a Faustian bargain. If you're going to make yourself available to the public feast, then...what happens to you happens to. And that is why you see so many movie stars walking around incognito, or behind dark glasses or fleeing from the sight of paparazzi. On the other hand, there are people who do not make the deal, somebody...like J.D. Salinger that doesn't buy into it and does not become a celebrity. I mean, I...I can't imagine, I'm not sure what an anti-icon would be because presumably, it would be invisible or it would be a black hole somewhere...

Sarah Hampson: But we don't love them for...we love them for what they're doing on the screen but we're also...they're not paragons of good behaviour...

Lewis Lapham: ...No, no...they get the, that's the license that they're given, they act...to be able...outrageous and extravagant dimension in order to, to personify, display our own vainglory and our own wish to become a "noble savage" in the manner of Rousseau. I mean, they're acting it out and we can see that they are...they are doing the same thing that we would do, had only we the chance to do it.

Don McKellar: The Greek gods were not exactly paragons of good behaviour either...

Lewis Lapham: No...

Don McKellar: ...in my recollection...But I was thinking the same thing, because, in my encounters with celebrities—I'm one of those one, maybe it's my vanity but I don't like to think I have this reverence, I think, I always feel uncomfortable and disappointed, but then again, that's the way I usually feel in church [*sound of laughter*] so maybe there is some similarity, but do you really feel it is an actual, the...desire...for celebrity-dom is a religious impulse? Or is it more, just as you were saying, materialistic or fetishistic?

Lewis Lapham: Well, I think it is a religious impulse, it's a form of polytheism...I mean, one thing about celebrity is that, if it's major-league celebrity, we're talking about money, these people are people that ah...are wealthy, so it's...it...to my mind of course, the active religion in the United States at the moment is the Mammon and the golden calf, I mean we've strayed from the...the true path of righteousness, and so here's a way of worshipping wealth. I mean, it's wealth incarnate and it's wonderfully polytheistic, I mean there...because the demand is so...is so great. Movie stars, I mean soap opera people receive, literally, thousands and thousands of letters from fans opening secrets of the heart that they would not tell their mothers, or maybe wouldn't even tell Oprah...[*sound of laughter*]...

Sarah Hampson: But I often think too, that we are interested in their transformation and when you can look at someone like Nicole Kidman who came on the scene in *Days of Thunder*, or whatever, I'm not sure if that was the film and what she looked like then and what she looks like now, having been this sort of amazing woman that we all watch, and she kind of...that transformation, I think, as an audience member, to watch that, and I'm not just talking there about suddenly seeing them on the screen, I mean, just what celebrity can do for those people is rather interesting to watch, not just about wealth but about just how they transform as people, I think, is part of the draw, I think...I don't know...

Don McKellar: You mean, we're drawn by their mortality...as in...not just their...

Sarah Hampson: That celebrity transforms, you know? And...and, and we're just mere mortals watching them but there is something very interesting about...about watching them deal with fame. That's why the Britney Spears is so interesting, how she was able to...she crashed...then she's kind of transformed and now she's kind of risen again. It's fascinating.

Murray Pomerance: But celebrity is surely the epitome of...of...of the case of plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose, they transform and change all of the time and yet, they're always exactly the same and we can always see that glint in the eye or that little tweak at the corner of say, Carey Grant's face when he smiles. It's always the Carey Grant smile, even when he was younger, we can identify it...and we, I think, hold on to that perhaps, as a kind of life raft to hold onto to help us navigate through a world that's eternally shifting and changing very rapidly, this modern world is...some would call it a post-modern world but it's certainly totally in flux but the celebrity image is something we can at least think we know, which, made me very happy, actually.

One day two years ago, while I was filling up my car at Sunset and La Brea in Los Angeles, and when I finished pumping the gas and hung up the pump, I noticed that Sean Penn was standing next to me filling up his car. And I said, "Hello," and he said something to me.

Don McKellar: I can imagine...*[Sound of laughter]*...you're lucky you got away with just a word.

Murray Pomerance: Could you please put up your hand if you are even vaguely interested to know what it was he said?...*[laughter]*...Now, a day or two later ...*[laughter]*...

Sarah Hampson: Hey! That's not fair! *[Laughing]* Oh sorry!

Murray Pomerance: I'm going somewhere with this...a day or two later, and this is all true, I was with my friend Terry Dale as she and I were driving around Los Angeles and she said something to me. Put up your hand if you are even vaguely interested to know what she said.

[Hearty laughter from the speakers and the audience]

Murray Pomerance: Right, now, I think the point I am trying to make is something like, to be interested in celebrity in some way is not to be interested in people...see...and I wonder, Lewis, if you'd like to play with that...

Lewis Lapham: No, that's true...that's the point of the story at the beginning, the YMHA ah, turns down the individuals that I mentioned by the way among them, Billy Collins and Sam Shepherd, but the ah...they weren't interested in what was going to be said...and that's McLuhan's point too, it's the medium that's the message, it's the celebrity as object and not...you know...the...your encounter

with Sean Penn at the gas station, there're a lot of stories, if you read the Greek myth where people wander into the forest and they meet Diana, or they meet Hermes, or you know, a nymph or a faun and they have an encounter with somebody from another world and the notion that the celebrity inhabits another world, which you may think is divine or not, but certainly a world of power. That, that...I've known journalists, who if they could get on a plane—journalists who are terrified of flying—but if they were on a plane with...Sean Connery, they figure that they were—that plane could never crash *[sound of laughter]*...and...and...it was the only time they weren't...you know, afraid.

Don McKellar: At the same time, do you think that's possibly breaking down somewhat with uh...celebrity, the idea of idealized celebrity-dom itself is transforming with the internet, with people assuming celebrities' personas in virtual worlds, with reality television, with internet celebrities, with this idea that you can be famous without, without being a movie star...

Lewis Lapham: Well, you're trying to create your own celebrity, in other words, in the years between the death of Alexander the Great and the birth of Christ, between let's say 300 BC and 1, the eastern, I mean, the Mediterranean world is ruled for the most part, by money, I mean, it's the only thing that mattered...And...citizens living throughout Asia Minor, Antioch or Ephesus or whatever town, what they would do to exalt their own magnificence—this is a very early form of Facebook. *[Sound of laughter]* What they would do is they would buy a street corner or an intersection and obviously the more important intersections went for a higher price...location...*[sound of laughter]* so they buy the street corner, and then they would buy one of four standard sculpture torsos, two for women, one was Venus the other was the Earth Mother, for men it was either the Sage or the General and they'd buy the um...the torso, and then again, depending how rich they were, they would be able to commission a sculptor to put their own head to put on top of that torso, they could either afford the equivalent of Annie Leibovitz or they could afford the equivalent of somebody on Facebook, but the...but the idea was to...to a...establish their identity in a realm of, that might conceivably have something to do with power...And I assume that some of that same impulse is, is behind people trying to gather themselves constituencies on Facebook, I mean, telling the story of their lives. I really can't imagine anything.

Murray Pomerance: I think the head very important with celebrities. The head as, you know the central part of the personality. I was reading an interesting book by Guy Davenport that I brought along tonight, just so I could seem to be an academic who can quote from a book because that is the role I am playing. The book's called *Objects on a Table*, it's really interesting, and there's a chapter in

here called “The Head as Fate,” which makes that case that in western society, we really revere the ability of the face to express and the mouth to announce, and you know, I have to assure you, it wasn’t because I saw his hand holding the gas pump that I knew it was Sean Penn...I looked up...

Don McKellar: I remember reading some study that said the only common characteristic among celebrities is that they have bigger heads, on average...

Sarah Hampson: ...Lollipop people, they call them. I have often thought about this, the notion of the familiarity we have with those famous faces...and because film captures the nuance in that expression and they are up close to us...so I have found, for instance, that when I’m interviewing someone like Michael Caine, and I did that once, and I was alone in a hotel room with him and I’m asking him questions and inside my head, I’m thinking, “what am I doing here with Michael Caine, he looked so...there was a real...and I’m not starstruck, um, at all...well, sometimes I am, and with Michael Caine, a little bit...but I looked at his face and realized how much I’ve seen it and how I know that little, just as you were saying, I know the way it works, and the certain expression and it’s a form of intimacy, like, and I think there’s something in there of the human psychology of the familiarity of a face, because if you think about how we move through the world and how few people we see on the street every day that we can recognize or the sort of comfort of seeing the face of our loved ones—there’s something in that, I think, because I have interviewed some people like P. D. James or wonderful authors who are iconic, interesting but I don’t feel the same familiarity with their face, I don’t feel moved or...there’s something about that I think. And I, you know, again it’s part of the medium, it’s communicated through film, perhaps that’s why film stars are more ah...we love them more, revere them more just because the size of the image? I don’t know but I think that’s part of it.

Murray Pomerance: I’m thinking of two authors whose faces strike me as being unforgettable, and those are Norman Mailer and Jacqueline Suzanne...I can’t get either face out of my mind, and yet we always see these books with authors’ faces, headshots, on the jacket and the face of an author has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with what goes on when one writes, I mean one doesn’t write through the face and one doesn’t express what one is writing through the face, one writes from the brain through the *hands* using some technique—I knew one guy who was using longhand—but there’s no play of the face, and what a writer looks like, facially, when he’s writing is of no consequence, yet we keep marketing writers by their face, we market everybody by their face. Of course, in the 1930s and ’40s Hollywood was actually systematized according to the face of the stars, tremendous monies were invested and these were constructed by the

studios and not by the persons. You would just walk in early in the morning, and sit calmly in a chair and *they* would do your face and photograph your face and light your face and your face really, literally by contract, belong to them, not really to you insofar as it was this celebrity face. So...

Lewis Lapham: But the same thing happens with the covers in *Vanity Fair*, doesn't it?

Murray Pomerance: Yeah...

Lewis Lapham: I mean, isn't it? That's a real, manufactured product, maybe computer-enhanced later, but I mean, it's a really contrived image...that face, that you finally see.

Sarah Hampson: And I mean, one of the things I think that's very clear in that exhibition ah...here...the *Vanity Fair* exhibition...is just, it makes you wonder about the kind of advancement of photography as an art and how that's contributed to it, because if you look at Leibovitz's *mise en scène*, I mean, they're like Velázquez paintings of the Spanish royalty, you know, in terms of the way they are...art directed, and so on...and very different from the early photographs, which are much, just, perhaps...they're not colour for one...and, you know just the different technological advancements.

Don McKellar: Well they're also doing classic Deco poses and Modernist poses. Now, as you said, the main thing I thought all the current ones look like pastiches of past ideas of glamour, and very often actual recreations of that, like a Joshua Reynolds painting, or a...which is ah...which is...odd...I mean it's true, often the later poses seem to me like ideas of celebrity or glamour, rather than actual glamour.

Murray Pomerance: Now, there's a hunger I'd like to bring up, if I may...um that certainly strikes me and I think, probably strikes a number of us when we see these faces, and it's somehow, to crawl underneath this...this façade and get to whatever we might think it might be that's there—some essence of reality or actuality—that's not constructed.

Don McKellar: Yes well...I know, I was just...I realized after a point that I was just going through, looking for the little imperfections, like there's a little weird line in Greta Garbo's lip, or Demi Moore's inoculation mark, or there's a weird bump on Kim Basinger's back and things like that, it made me think it's sort of similar to the process you have when you're watching pornography—looking at

pornography—where you're, you know, as much as it might try and idealize the images, you're really looking for that little sign of humanity to seep through, that little sign of imperfection, in fact, I thought this whole exhibit would be better read in a magazine in your bedroom. *[Sound of laughter]*

Sarah Hampson: Well what's interesting about that is those photographs are not necessarily taken for them to be enlarged, it's a very intimate relationship when a photograph appears in a magazine, it's that whole intimacy of reading.

Don McKellar: I just wanted that perfume smell that comes with *Vanity Fair*

Sarah Hampson: *[Laughs]* Easily gotten...

Murray Pomerance: Yeah, Roland Barthes called that the "punctum," right? There's a point in a photograph that seems to puncture out...*[sound of agreement from the conversants]* and open it all, and you found a bunch of them in the show...I noticed Louise Brooks' bizarrely symmetrical um chin-cleft and noticed that her hair had been done to match it, and I thought oh that was...—but the trouble with *Vanity Fair*, and I guess I can be honest here, I hate *Vanity Fair*.

[Laughter]

I truly hate *Vanity Fair*. If I were to choose, that would be nowhere near the top of my list of favourite things, and you know I think part of it is they construct every little thing, including that little punctum that you think is the revealing moment, that's put in there too.

Don McKellar: Right, nowadays it is.

Murray Pomerance: I keep wanting to know, where is the bedrock here? And I can't find it.

Sarah Hampson: I was going to say earlier when you were saying about how we want to get beneath the veneer, one of the things that I mean, I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it, but certainly having done this interview column for as long as I have, and having interviewed all these people, is that...celebrity becomes a—or fame—kind of affliction of sorts, I think, and what is often drawing people to want it, is really the adulation of strangers and in a way, you know, can you blame them? I mean, there's a lot of neediness, I think, in wanting to pursue fame, in wanting...There's a guy in Hollywood, Drew Pinsky, Dr. Drew Pinsky who's written an awful lot about, it's called the "mirror effect," he's always on

Larry King, and he's always trying to deconstruct the affliction of celebrity, he talks about it with the death of Michael Jackson and so on and so forth, just because he is trying to look at it from a psychological point of view and psychoanalyze what celebrity is, so he's talked about how these are often troubled personalities, that go to pursue fame for fame's sake because they want that kind of validation, and why does someone like, you know...

Don McKellar: That's just consolation for people who aren't famous, that's what that is...

[Laughter]

Sarah Hampson: But you know, you wonder you know, why people, why...you know, Barbara Streisand, well not Barbara Streisand but...Cher is on the endless "Last Tour"—why would she keep doing that?

Don McKellar: That's true, I guess...why these people do the ads,

Sarah Hampson: Yeah...

Murray Pomerance: One of the things tonight that I'm finding delightful and um...confusing, in a wonderful way, uh, is something Lewis has been doing since he started talking...um, and I wonder if it's driving anyone else equally crazy because I think it's fantastic, he's bouncing, like some metaphorical, Energizer bunny, back and forth from classical antiquity...and tiny little examples that were made from something that happened a week ago that are perfect analogies. That's the world we all care about, the celebrity world, who's being interviewed by Larry King tonight? Who wants to know about Ephesus and Homer and, you know, they're dead! They're dead! They're dead and gone! It's all classical, it's Greek scholarship, it's...you know, the Parthenon. He's tying the Parthenon to contemporary celebrity attentiveness, and that's really intriguing, don't you think?

[Laughter and applause]

Am I the only one who thinks that's intriguing?

[Sound of applause]

Lewis Lapham: Well, as you know, I'm doing a new magazine called *Lapham's Quarterly* that does that—it takes history as a continuum. And um...the old story is also our story, and the ah...here we are say, in chapter 436, but unless you knew

what happened in chapter 2, you're somewhat at a loss. Goethe once said that, "He who cannot draw on 3,000 years is living hand-to-mouth." [Laughter].

Um...that's true. And the...Chesterton once made the point that...history is the means with which we, ah, can rebel against the arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. So, because I think that story still lives. I think that history is a living story. And it's in all of us...I mean that's where we've been and the things that we save on a 3,000-year journey from Mesopotamia are things that have found to be beautiful or useful or true. And they, there are some things that were true 3,000 years ago and are still true. Many things are not—I mean, some things are, some things are not—it's important to know which is which.

Murray Pomerance: Yes, a mass-mediated celebrity universe is distinctly counter-historical.

Don McKellar: ...I do remember...

Lewis Lapham: Well, yes, that's McLuhan's sadness...

Don McKellar: Well, I was saying I do sort of seem to recall Plato sort of poo-hooing anthropomorphized gods, and certain Romans calling it "anti-Roman," the Greek anthropomorphic gods, do you think it's just an old, old argument that's been there since antiquity, the same instinct that intellectuals are deriding?

Lewis Lapham: Oh well, you know it's...it's...Moses is saying that to the Jews, I mean, don't be idolaters, Muslims the same thing, no graven image. I mean the tendency, the human tendency to make idols is I think, probably impossible to eliminate. Celebrities are idols, I mean, American Idol couldn't be...and the ah...and again, the demand for whatever need it meets in the audience among the faithful—fans, is a word that comes from fanatic and it has a religious connotation in etymology, so there is that desire to find an object as Hazlitt points out, on...with which or in which we can invest our own passion and desire.

Sarah Hampson: And there's always been too in the last decade, I think, a discussion about whether this sort of pursuit or interest in celebrity would wane. Particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 people thought, "Ok, we're done with it now, we've got to move to more serious things," and in fact, it's gotten more large and you know, so is that serving as a great distraction or is it...I've often wondered about that, is it a necessary distraction or is it because we are also concentrating on other things or is it just taking the place of that so we're not looking at what's really important? You know?

Don McKellar: I will say with the economic crises, working in the movies, I mean...you know...I'm mortified to be here as a Canadian celebrity, if I am a celebrity and people joke about Canadian celebrities and I always say, that actually it's a critique of celebrity culture. But in as much as that's case I think now it's sort of a failed project because now it's impossible to make a movie in Canada without having a celebrity—without an American-style celebrity, and my American friends say the same, that since this economic crisis, there's been this entrenchment that you have to have a star attached, ah...so there does seem to be some economic—some direct economic correlation.

Sarah Hampson: And yet, you know, you look at *Precious*, the movie, that you know, they the you know, the girl, the 300-pound girl...woman they found to play the character in that movie on the cover of the *New York Sunday Times*.

Don McKellar: But Oprah is selling that movie...

Sarah Hampson: Yeah...yeah...

Lewis Lapham: Well they expect Sarah Palin's book to make a hundred million dollars. *[Sound of laughter]* They expect it to sell however many hundreds of thousands, millions of copies it takes to make that number...Now...*[laughter]*...I ask you...what is selling is celebrity...

Sarah Hampson: There's a morbid curiosity about that too, it's not just...

Lewis Lapham: Ok.

Sarah Hampson: Don't you think?

[Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: My point is, the thing, it will be utterly lifeless...I mean...the prose...

[Laughter]

Sarah Hampson: The prose is not going to be good, let's start there...

Don McKellar: She has a ghost-writer...

[Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: The thing is...it's an object. You're buying an object. You might as well be buying a totem pole, I mean, you know? [Laughter]

Sarah Hampson: Yeah, so ... well, I think there, yes, she's a sort of celebrity, but we don't know enough about her, we what to get beneath the veneer...

[Sound of crowd and conversants grown...laughter]

We want to know how she might, you know, hang herself right? In that book. I don't know, I do...

Lewis Lapham: That's like the crowd watching O. J. Simpson...quite a few of them are expecting him to shoot himself in the head...or it's like the crowd watching the balloon –

Sarah Hampson: Balloon boy –

Lewis Lapham: - hoping that the boy will die, you know, makes for a more satisfactory story. It...evokes a volume of consciousness and emotion which is what the electronic media, what the, this again this is all McLuhan, but that's the point, it's consciousness that doesn't postulate the consciousness of anything in particular. It can be a talking horse or it can be Plato. Doesn't matter.

Murray Pomerance: The problem with McLuhan is, I think, that he's too romantic. Um...a lot of what we've been saying has really been based on the assumption that celebrity is a hollow nothing and whatever real humanity associated with it, beside it, around it, behind it, is real—and I just wonder, in order to be playful and for no other reason, so help me, what would happen if we just flip that—and wondered if there's actually something wonderful about celebrity, something wonderful and accessible to our age now, that's actually at least as interesting as people.

I'm sorry, I saw *Surrogates* recently, and um...I really, there's something about that movie—it's a really stupid movie—but there's something about it I can't get out of my head. It's a movie where everyone on earth has a being, a surrogate, looks just like them but younger and cleaned up...

[Laughter]

Lewis Lapham: A makeover!

Murray Pomerance: A makeover—Ah...Don McKellar's surrogate would look like that, for instance *[laughs]*

Don McKellar: What a rip-off! *[laughs]*

Murray Pomerance: The real people are sitting at home in some kind of wheelchair device with a headset on and whatever they think or feel, the surrogate goes around and does for them—they never leave the chair. And um, it's this idea implicit in the film and implicit in our critiques is that of course, the surrogates are horrible and the people in those chairs are real and I'm wondering if maybe it's the other way around. We love these celebrities because they're so incredible. They're concocted but they're so incredible.

Sarah Hampson: Well, and look, some of them are better, some of them have more substance than others. Meryl Streep, I think, in the discussion when she was here with Johanna Schneller, one of my colleagues at the *Globe* two weeks ago or whenever it was, I mean, she doesn't really buy into the fame part, I mean she does in that she is who she is, but she's a real artist, and I think that the interest in her is because of the artistry she brings to acting—it's true, you're laughing, don't laugh! Because it's true! But I think our interest in her and her ability to inhabit different characters is far different than our interest in Britney Spears for instance. So I think there are degrees of you know, different kind of interest in different celebrities...Mr. Professor. *[Laughs]*

Murray Pomerance: I was hoping against all hope that Britney Spears name would not turn up tonight. Because for some reason, I've been asked for the last year and a half by the press around the world, actually, to talk about Britney Spears and why they think I want to do it, I don't know. But you know, she's one of those fascinating voids, she's a void and we can't take our eyes off her. We keep wondering, "why are we looking at her?" and that increases the thrill. We know she's a void and we can't take her eyes off her.

[An unintelligible mumble is heard from the audience]

Sarah Hampson: *[Laughs]* Speak for yourself

[Laughter]

Sarah Hampson: Because I would argue, that part of our interest in her at this stage is simply because we know some of her back story, and that makes her more interesting now. The back story being the shaved head, the trouble with mom...you know...

Murray Pomerance: Yes, well...

Sarah Hampson: Bad husband...

Don McKellar: Once Britney Spears comes up, the moderator steps to the podium [*laughter from the conversants and the audience*]

[Sound of applause and laughter; podcast ends]