

## Star Struck!: The Phenomenological Affect of Celebrity on Broadway

During the spring of 2013, Nora Ephron's play *Lucky Guy* played to sold out houses recouping its producers' initial investment of \$3.6 million after a mere eight weeks, a remarkable feat for a Broadway drama. Whereas most successes on the Great White Way are splashy musicals with high production values (think *Wicked* and *The Lion King*) so-called "straight plays" usually operate at a financial loss as part of a comparatively short run. *Lucky Guy*, however, was an exception in that Ephron's play grossed over \$1 million weekly while earning Tony Award nominations for its director, playwright, and most significantly, its leading actor: Tom Hanks. [\[1\]](#)

Like Ephron, Hanks had never worked on Broadway prior to *Lucky Guy*, or anywhere else of note in the theatre, thereby begging the question: how can two relative novices of the stage achieve such critical acclaim and financial success on their first try? I argue that the reason for this is Hanks's celebrity. With symbolic capital that included two Academy Awards and roles in Hollywood hits such as Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), Hanks's involvement ensured that *Lucky Guy* would find and *affect* its audience. As Guy Debord states in his seminal work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, celebrity is a "commodity [that] attains the total occupation of social life," [\[2\]](#) a conceit that speaks to the fetishization of movie stars like Hanks who try their hand at stage acting. But what gets lost in this negotiation between celebrity film star and theatre artist? What causes the commodified frenzy that defines the relationship between an actor and his audience, a connection whose ramifications are as significant artistically as they are socio-economically? What is the spectator's state of consciousness in this phenomenal exchange? Ultimately, what does society's fascination with celebrity mean for theatre as an art form?

This article positions celebrity as a socially induced phenomenon that causes regressive perceptions of stage acting, and by extension, the art of theatre. Relying on a combination of cultural materialism and modern psychology, I will examine the phenomenological connection between celebrity actors and their adoring "stage" audience. Thus, I argue the fetishization of a celebrity such as Hanks produces a viable, if imagined, relationship between a "star" and his audience, a negotiation that has reductive implications for the art of the stage actor.

Celebrity actors are directly associated with film and television, insofar as their image is distributed and consumed *en masse* towards forging familiarity with the public. Indeed, the term familiarity shares the same etymological root as "fame" and is a benchmark for becoming a celebrity. In fact, fame and celebrity are mutually inclusive concepts resulting from exposure through the media. From Facebook and Twitter to television and the Internet, today's cultural consumer has unprecedented access to the lives and careers of famous people. [\[3\]](#) As such, a social phenomenon has ensued in which the fascination of celebrities becomes a self-fulfilling practice with consumers craving and following mediatized narratives that create and perpetuate household names. With respect to actors, again, film and television especially apply to this dynamic. While stage performers have occasionally garnered fame throughout theatre history, its scope and measure pale by comparison to film and TV stars today. Whereas the likes of Edwin Forrest and the Lunts, for example, were celebrities in their respective chronological contexts, they simply did not attract the worldwide attention that today's film and TV icons do. Thus, on-camera performance mediums in conjunction with mass media are the root and cause of an actor's fame and

celebrity formation.

Being famous and being skilled in one's artistic craft as an actor, however, are not necessarily inclusive considerations. It would seem rather easy to identify the likes of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Tom Cruise as celebrities, for example, but a different matter altogether to recognize them as trained actors. Like Hanks, neither attended drama school or received any formal education in acting. Instead, they had fortunate career "breaks" as young men and have since burnished their fame starring in blockbusters such as *The Terminator* and *Mission Impossible*—movies that could hardly be considered demonstrations of virtuosic acting, insofar as the material is largely driven by action-packed plotlines, special affects, and two-dimensional characterizations, thereby calling for a performance style that lends more to a personality type than a skilled artist. To borrow again from Debord, it is sheer spectacle. As such, a celebrity is needed to complete the branding and distributional appeal of the film.

Of course there are film and television productions with gifted performers. Yet on-camera acting is decidedly different from the stage, where an actor must possess the physical, vocal, and emotional heft to render a performance with size and presence worthy of arresting the audience's attention for lengthy periods of time. There are after all no second takes when acting onstage. On-camera performance, however, requires an authenticity that is not needed for the stage. The adage "the camera does not lie" is a truism in that film/TV acting is steeped in verisimilitude, whereas the stage actor renders a theatricalized illusion of reality. Acting for the camera and onstage are distinct practices that require separate and select skills. It is no different from distinguishing the qualifications between a musical theatre actor and one who specializes in Shakespeare, or, to reference another field altogether, it can be likened to the difference between a violinist and a trumpet player—both are musicians, but neither would be expected to handle the other's instrument with the same skill as their primary *métier*. To be sure, I am not arguing that theatre acting is superior to on-camera performance, but rather, that it requires a specialized skillset that takes years of training and experience to master. The expectation that someone who has not been onstage for decades (as was the case with Hanks) can convincingly and compellingly render a major role seems remote. While a fine and accomplished film actor, Hanks was at best under-qualified to hold the stage for two hours, as noted by the *New York Times*' Ben Brantley who meekly described his performance as "honorable."[\[4\]](#)

Celebrity can be understood in a number of ways. First, it is a social phenomenon in which the structures and institutions of a given culture are determining factors. For example, in Europe a football star like Luis Suarez is well known to the general public, given the continent's passion for the sport, but in the US he is hardly a household name because we are comparably disinterested in professional soccer. On the other hand, some celebrities have a scope of recognition that is worldwide: Madonna, Muhammad Ali, and Barack Obama, to name a few. With respect to the latter, the symbiotic relationship of celebrity and fame comes into play, insofar as global leaders—for reasons that are both intended and not—receive media attention that provides them the same widespread idolatry (and criticism) as those in the more commonly *celebretized* spheres of sport and entertainment. The current phenomenon of Donald Trump's pursuit of the US presidency supports this point in that he wields his celebrity to generate media attention and dominate his opponents: as the *Wall Street Journal* reports, Trump is "sucking the oxygen" out of the campaign.[\[5\]](#) Despite the fact that he has never held public office and refuses to offer a single policy plan of substance, as of this writing he continues to lead in every national and state poll. Thus, his celebrity and media coverage can be seen as the signature reason for his popularity among prospective Republican primary voters.

The second distinguishing aspect of celebrity is what Robert van Krieken calls “the economics of attention,” or the ways in which the “intersection between culture and commerce” become endeavors of capital exchange.<sup>[6]</sup> The grist of this process is the invocation and distribution of a highly visible image that serves as a branding mechanism for the purpose of generating economic, cultural, political, and/or symbolic capital. Here too Trump provides an excellent example in that his brand, and by extension, the capital it garners on behalf of his campaign and the media outlets that cover him is significant. Likewise, an actor is valued for his brand as defined by fame and notoriety, characteristics that do not necessarily equate with his artistry. As this article endeavors to demonstrate, an actor’s status in the entertainment industry is commensurate with his prestige and sociopolitical status.<sup>[7]</sup> His worth to a given production often comes down to how much attention he can bring to it, a value that is determined symbolically. Therefore, celebrity can be understood as a form of symbolic capital that lends recognition, credit, and legitimacy to a project’s *exchange value*. Consequently, the “buzz” and “charisma” that a revered celebrity such as Hanks brings to a theatrical production has unmistakable economic implications. In addition to providing credibility to Ephron’s play, his status as a famous, Academy Award-winning star assured producers that *Lucky Guy* had a chance of being that rare Broadway drama that turns a profit.

What does this dynamic mean for the US theatre, and more specifically, the aesthetic of American stage acting? To the extent that producers are intent on treating their production as a commercial endeavor, we will continue to see celebrities such as Hanks appearing in roles and contexts for which they are under-qualified. For all his remarkable accomplishments in film and television, Hanks is unproven and untrained as a stage actor. Casting him in a major part on Broadway, a venue that is itself considered the apotheosis of US theatre, sends a clear message that an actor is valued not so much for his craft, but rather, the attention that he can bring a project vis-à-vis his celebrity. The *New York Times* drama critic, Charles Isherwood, makes this very point in his article, “Stage Acting: It’s Nice Work if You Can Afford It”:

Big movie and television stars are the mega-corporations of the acting profession, and they seem to be acquiring an increasing measure of the industry’s rewards, leaving less for the vast number of fameless actors.... If performers’ attractiveness and fame are what studios and even theaters want to buy and market, talent and experience naturally become commodities with lesser or no value.<sup>[8]</sup>

The film and television industry has come to determine the casting practices of the US theatre. Though the example of Hanks pertains to Broadway, where Hollywood stars amass cultural capital by burnishing their resumes with stage credits, the US not-for-profit theatre is also prone to the commodified underpinnings of the celebrity society. In addition to landing the occasional household name to tread their boards, regional theatres from San Diego to Chicago consistently ape the production practices of the commercial theatre, as indicated by *American Theatre* magazine, which reports that thirteen of the fourteen “most-produced” plays appearing on US stages in 2013 were either done “On” or Off-Broadway.<sup>[9]</sup>

US actors are incentivized to become celebrities, or at least to pursue work in the sectors of the profession that supplement the celebrity society: film and television. Indeed, having a stage career is generally unfeasible today. Whereas forty years ago an actor could work year-round as part of a resident company at a regional theatre, today he must look to film and television to make a living.<sup>[10]</sup> Unfortunately, the mid-1970s and early-1980s witnessed a downturn in the US economy and a generational change of artistic directors, inauspicious developments that caused regional theatres to disband their resident

companies and cast on a show-by-show basis. This trend has persisted ever since. For example, the accomplished actor Jay O. Sanders claims that having a theatre career today is “totally impractical” and admits being forced to seek employment in the entertainment industry for his livelihood:

My goal has been to make it work so I can do the great classics and new plays on stage. I’ve done over 100 films, but I don’t think of them as my career. I am forced to diversify my work to make the money to support what I love and am trained to do.[\[11\]](#)

It is not only the remuneration of on-camera employment that benefits actors like Sanders, but the symbolic credibility that comes with working on a high profile project. The economics of attention could not be clearer. If an actor can appear with celebrities in major Hollywood films—a feat Sanders has repeatedly achieved—he advances his professional legitimacy, a crucial characteristic in winning future employment.

This sociocultural paradigm has serious ramifications for acting as an art form and the ways in which it is perceived. The symbolic value of celebrity manifests through a spectator’s intangible connection to certain thoughts, affects, and most significantly, feelings that are caused by—yet otherwise divorced from—the object (person) being fetishized. The Western Marxist Theodor Adorno articulates this phenomenal exchange in describing the fetishization of music. He argues that singers or instrumentalists are valued not for their ability to express a given composition, but for the ways in which they are marketed publicly: “For all contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated.”[\[12\]](#) Adorno goes on to depict the “fetish character” of music as a schism between the musician and the listener, as identified by the artist’s detachment from the materials of his labor. He uses NBC’s radio broadcasts of the celebrity conductor Arturo Toscanini to exemplify how radio and television detach the artist from the musical composition.[\[13\]](#) Both the artist and listener measure the cultural product’s value by its symbolic worth, which in this instance pertains to Toscanini’s prestige. At no point in the production and reception of the NBC broadcast is there a tangible connection between Toscanini, his musicianship, and the listener/consumer. Instead, the dynamic of cultural production, distribution, and consumption is defined by the fetishization of Toscanini as “the world’s best composer,” thereby rendering both him and his work commodities that adhere to what Adorno terms the “culture industry.” [\[14\]](#)

Adorno claims the fetishization of singers also occurs at the expense of their artistry: “Musical fetishism takes possession of the public valuation of singing voices.”[\[15\]](#) The singer’s technical virtuosity and craft is eclipsed once he is mediated as a marketable commodity whose image and music fit the formula for success, which, again, is synonymous with the singer’s exchange value, a criterion determined by his status as a celebrity. We can see this socially induced phenomenon in today’s pop artists in that their image operates as a material good for mass consumption at the expense of vocal technique or musicality. From Justin Bieber to Lady Gaga, celebrity singers seem more intent on creating and safeguarding their image than enhancing whatever musicianship they might have. Gaga’s formulaic music, for example, is accompanied by her outlandish costumes and highly contrived iconoclasm, a strategy that is clearly advancing her brand according to [starcoun.com](http://starcoun.com), which anoints her the world’s most famous person.[\[16\]](#) A similar case could be made of her predecessor, Madonna, whose “success,” as pop culture scholar John Fiske asserts, was “due at least as much to her videos and her personality as her music.”[\[17\]](#) In tracing Madonna’s fame to her socially constructed image, Fiske reminds us that her first album, *Madonna* (1983), was initially a commercial failure and that it was not until she made the video “Lucky

Star” that her career began to take off.[18] The basis for this breakthrough, he argues, was to use mass media to deploy mythical signifiers to evoke a sexually empowered figure towards rendering Madonna a pop icon for adolescent girls and gay men, both of whom comprised her fan base during much of the 1980s. As Lady Gaga would do years later, Madonna represented a “fine example of the capitalist pop industry at work” and established a singing career that had little to do with “what she sounded like.”[19] As such, both would-be artists exemplify what Adorno refers to as “the star principle.”[20]

Adorno’s contemporary and colleague, Walter Benjamin, explains how the mass production and distribution of cultural goods as images causes artists to be alienated from their audience. Echoing Adorno’s concern for the social role of art during a time of unprecedented advancements in technology, Benjamin uses the actor to differentiate what he terms “cult” and “exhibition” values relative to theatre and film. In the case of the former, he argues stage acting possesses an *aura* that must be experienced live between the actor and his audience. This exchange can be likened to Jerzy Grotowski’s theorization and practice of “Poor Theatre,” an aesthetic devoid of spectacle and marked by the direct, ephemeral, and “holy encounter” defining the actor/spectator relationship.[21] Contrarily, film acting represents exhibition value, which can be synonymously understood as exchange value deriving from the technological mediation of art into objects that are reproduced *en masse*. Thus, a film actor’s celebrity is directly proportionate to the distribution and consumption of his image. Benjamin depicts this dynamic as the spectator “identifying with the camera,” or more specifically the image emanating from it, thereby causing the same schism between an artwork and its beholder that Adorno describes in the commodification of music.[22]

The irony to this phenomenon is when a celebrity does theatre. When an actor of Hanks’s stature appears onstage, it begs the question: is the audience responding to Hanks the celebrity or the character he is representing? Are they there to see Ephron’s play, or are they star-struck spectators arriving to see a celebrity in the flesh strut his stuff? While it would be impossible to exactly know what an audience’s collective intention is for seeing a given production, we can apply what the philosopher/psychiatrist collaborators Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari term the philosophy of desire to analyze the consciousness of said audience in the context of the celebrity society. Some psychiatrists and social scientists suggest that the phenomenon of fandom is para-social in that a beholder forms a fictional bond with a celebrity. This connection exists in degrees ranging from causal followers to an obsessed worshiper. In both instances, an individual idolizes celebrities according to how his/her “consciousness is structured and organized in a particular way.”[23] These points of connection can pertain to a range of self-identifying characteristics, such as gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and personal ideals. One’s sense of self and belonging in the world are reinforced through an imagined relationship with a complete stranger. Thus, the production and distribution of celebrities through and within the various media constituting the entertainment industry can be seen as a grand marketing ploy intended to appeal to intended audiences. This practice is obvious in advertising campaigns, for example, where celebrity endorsements are made according to the buyer being targeted. The commercial theatre operates this way too, which explains why actors are cast in leading roles not because they are experienced stage performers but rather, because they have the star power, the symbolic capital, to appeal to a certain consumer base. Indeed, America’s *crème de le crème* of theatre, Broadway, has been deploying this strategy for decades: Madonna’s appearance in David Mamet’s *Speed the Plow* had teens flocking to the theatres in 1988, just as Sean P. Diddy Combs and Daniel Radcliffe would respectively do on behalf of *A Raisin in the Sun* (2004) and *Equus* (2007).

Though the celebrification process exists in part at the level of the individual fan, it must be seen as a social phenomenon to understand its role in the commodification of US theatre and acting. As such, desire plays a significant role in the formation and sustaining of a given celebrity and how he can be utilized to market a theatrical production. At the core of classical theories of psychiatry is the concept of desire as per the parental/child relationship that then gets transferred onto another individual, usually a romantic partner. When considering this paradigm in the social sphere, desire must be seen as an abstraction, which in the context of capitalism means commodities, be they material possessions or symbols; the latter of course could be conceived as a celebrity. In this way desire is understood as the social unconscious constructing and conditioning consciousness vis-à-vis an imagined relationship with a famous person. This relationship varies according to the degree of emotional investment on the part of any given beholder, yet even for the more casual fan some form of socially induced phenomenon is at stake. Nothing is formed exclusively at the personal level. Raymond Williams refers to such a process as structures of feeling where “there is frequent tension between the received interpretation [a beholder’s fantasy] and practical experience,” otherwise understood as reality. [24] His theory suggests a social experience like an art movement or the idolization of an individual that takes on an unconscious presence within a certain cultural context, within which an individual’s perceptions of an object and/or experience becomes subsumed by the collective, thereby creating a “structure of feeling” that has significant implications along social lines. In the case of celebrities, dominant forms of social understanding jointly create and potentially sustain a person’s fame. The construction of Tom Hanks as a cultural icon proves as much. Since Hanks began amassing symbolic value for his cinematic achievements, especially dating back to his Academy Award winning work in *Forrest Gump* (1994), his prestige has continued to grow in US popular culture. His numerous starring roles in Hollywood blockbusters, his work as a producer of films and television programs, and as mentioned at the outset of the article, his debut on Broadway in a work penned by an unproven playwright—a project that would never have been produced had it not been for Hanks and his symbolic capital—all demonstrate the process and ramifications of celebrity formation.

Desire is at the heart of the social unconscious and can be seen as the primary source of celebrity formation. As such, it can be likened to Adorno’s critique of the fetishization of cultural goods in that society at large succumbs to the trappings of the culture industry in ways that remain largely undetectable. Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of desire can further illuminate the formation and function of celebrity. Though their overarching argument is to locate desire as a catalyst for political revolution, their paradigm can also apply to the social unconscious’s role in the celebrification process. Deleuze and Guattari argue that human desire exists at the level of the unconscious and is the catalyst for production in a capitalist society. Claiming that desire is constantly “striving [to] become more” by “becoming other [or] different,” they define it as a “force composed” of abstract machines that become manifest in an individual’s conscious and unconscious perception of social codes operating at the level of his thoughts, emotions, and corporeal experience. [25] The abstract machine, or force, functions as a sociocultural phenomenon dictating the course and content of material production, within which the psychological and the social are closely linked. The process of celebrification mobilizes a collective desire towards commodifying a given object for consumption: the star. Unlike standard material goods, however, the celebrity’s value to a consumer is intangible. Whereas one could purchase a stylish article of clothing or a fancy car to satisfy one’s consumer needs, purchasing a ticket to see a celebrity in a Broadway show provides the buyer the ontological experience he seeks: seeing a famous person in the flesh. To crudely borrow from Shakespeare, “the play is [NOT] the thing,” but rather, being in close proximity to the object of desire, the celebrity, is what prevails. [26] Driven by the social unconscious, the dotting patron buys his ticket to have an experience that he desires to be as “real” as it is unique. However, these characteristics

in the context of performance are antithetical and merely a psychological ruse existing at the social level. Adorno's schematization of mass culture makes this case in stating that the "difference between culture and practical life disappear."[\[27\]](#) The beauty of an aesthetic given to the realm of the imagination and uniqueness regresses to what Adorno terms "empirical reality," a pedestrian experience defined by "doing what everyone else does."[\[28\]](#) In fact, there is nothing unique whatsoever about seeing a celebrity up close in a performance; quite the contrary, it is merely a socially induced product of mass culture masquerading as something special.

Adorno addresses the issue of an artwork's uniqueness relative to "empirical reality" by referring to the "spiritual essence" of the former, and can therein apply to stage acting and theatre.[\[29\]](#) Comparing aesthetic beauty to a fireworks display, he depicts art as a transcendent experience that can be identified as an "apparition."[\[30\]](#) The apparition implies a spirituality that causes a phenomenological effect that is evanescent—evanescence reconceived as "liveness" is of course a distinguishing characteristic of theatre. Ultimately, Adorno does not use the term "spirit" in an ethereal manner, but addresses it relative to an artwork's form. In arguing that "the spirit of artworks is bound up with their form," he defines it as a sensual affect that is the product of a given piece's constituent elements.[\[31\]](#) Contrary to supernatural associations with the term, Adorno describes spirit as an artwork's "vital" and "substantial" essence, and not "a thin abstract layer hovering above" the selfsame work.[\[32\]](#) It is affective, if phenomenal, and the result of a process that can be objectively measured.

Identifying art as jointly spiritual and tangible, Adorno dialectically analyzes the dynamic between a work's phenomenal affect and its material form, which he terms its "thing-like" dimensions; in the case of the stage actor this would be the expressivity of his body, voice, emotions, and imagination.[\[33\]](#) The work's spirit is thus generated by the artwork's material form for the purpose of transcending that very form. While the artwork's spirit is its defining attribute, it is created through a process that is contingent on the work's constitutive elements, such as the dialectical connection between the sounds of a sonata relative to its paginal composition, or actors mediating a scripted drama into a character. It is near impossible, however, for a celebrity to achieve spiritualization in a theatrical performance. No matter how skilled he might be, the celebrity actor's fame ultimately becomes his undoing in that the audience is likelier to be conscious of his personality at the expense of the character he portrays. In fact, there are some celebrities who have been trained for the stage and are quite gifted as such—Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, and the late Phillip Seymour Hoffman, to name a few. Indeed, these three actors were the headliners for the New York Shakespeare Festival's critically acclaimed production of *The Seagull* in 2001. Nonetheless, their familiarity to the average audience member compromised the significant criterion of losing themselves in the role, a point the headline of the *New York Times* review inadvertently underscored: "Streep meets Chekhov, Up in Central Park."[\[34\]](#) The issue is not Ben Brantley's praise for these three actors, which was consistent with nearly every critical account of their performances, but that their familiarity to the average spectator superseded the characters they played, and as Michael Quinn's semiotic analysis of celebrity actors suggests: "exceeded the needs of the fiction [by] keeping them from disappearing entirely into the acting figure of the drama."[\[35\]](#) Writing in 1990, Quinn's prescient observation has never been more fully realized in US theatre. Today's audiences are distracted by their preconceived perceptions of a celebrity's personal life and/or former projects to the point of not being capable of "accepting" his performance at face value.[\[36\]](#) Moreover, this subliminal ghosting of a given performance is abetted by a show's branding, as producers attempt to capitalize on the name recognition of their star performer(s). Unfortunately, the actor's actual work gets lost in the exchange.

The presence of the celebrity actor therefore has a potentially regressive effect on the theatrical production. To the extent that the performer takes attention away from the production, he can be seen as little more than a distraction, the source of which, again, comes from the social unconscious desire to be in the presence of someone famous. While it is altogether possible that some audience members can overlook these types of distractions, most cannot, as Ben Brantley suggests in his review of Julia Roberts in David Greenberg's *Three Days of Rain* (2006):

The startling conclusion of most of the critics seems to be that the Oscar-winning actress who can command \$20 million for a role in Hollywood actually cannot act very well at all. At least, not when her audience is a flesh-and-bone one, rather than a sympathetic lens.[\[37\]](#)

Brantley tellingly summarizes how Roberts's celebrity dominated the production at the expense of Greenberg's play:

One of the three stars of the Broadway revival of *Three Days of Rain*, which opened last night at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater, is Julia Roberts, who is making her big-time theatrical debut.... There is no way that this show is not going to be all about Julia.... Ms. Roberts is the sole reason this limited-run revival has become the most coveted ticket in town.[\[38\]](#)

The source of the theatrical production, *Three Days of Rain*, is overcome by the forces of socially manifested desire in which the material good, seeing Roberts perform live, becomes the selling point.

While one might argue that casting Roberts has the benefit of widening the audience to include those who would not otherwise go to the theatre, her appearance onstage has reductive implications for US acting, and moreover, the role of art in society. The desire undergirding our social unconscious gives rise to the spectacle of celebrity, thereby causing society to consume a person's image *en masse* at the expense of the actress's work and the play in which she appears. The allure of Roberts in affect displaces her acting, and moreover, redefines the theatrical experience in her image. The irony of course is unmistakable in that Roberts's fame negates any chance the audience will be capable of encountering her performance in the context of *Three Days of Rain*.

Guy Debord argues that technologically generated spectacle formulates the phenomenon of celebrity. Similar to Benjamin's description of an artwork's "exhibition value," Debord posits spectacles—and the images that constitute them—as "signs of the ruling production" that signify how people should live their lives.[\[39\]](#) Adorno makes a similar case in discussing the harmful effects of film and television, insofar as both mediums uphold potentially damaging and "nefarious" social stereotypes by evoking a "pseudo-reality" at the expense of a dialectical analysis of society, or put more simply, film and television tend to privilege conformity and discourage critical analysis.[\[40\]](#) The on-camera actor therefore feeds into a system of signs that simultaneously shapes and reinforces the "banal" status quo by offering cultural consumers "pseudo-enjoyment."[\[41\]](#) Celebrity performers are particularly influential in this process, as Debord notes:

The celebrity, the spectacular representation of a living human being, embodies this banality by embodying the image of a possible role. Being a star means specializing in the seemingly lived; the star is the object of identification[\[42\]](#)

Celebrity actors are therefore dominated by and contribute to society's commodification of cultural goods, in which artistry loses its uniqueness and "everything" becomes "mediated by images" that separate people from themselves and others in favor of conforming to the capitalist social order.[\[43\]](#)

Debord identifies the regression of fetishizing artistic goods for mass consumption, thereby reducing them to commodities that displace tangible human interaction.[\[44\]](#) The social unconscious is very much at play in this dynamic, as people unwittingly are led by desire in responding to technologically generated images and thus "the commodity attains the total occupation of social life."[\[45\]](#) The acquisition of commodities relies on a process of "spectacular representation" that is marked by the peddling of sameness under the guise of autonomy, as the hocking of reproductions—such as an actor's image—masquerades as "the real thing."[\[46\]](#) The culture industry is at the center of this process, which in the case of acting can best be seen in the trappings of Hollywood, thereby causing what Adorno terms the "deaestheticization of art."[\[47\]](#)

The spectacular grip of celebrity on the American theatre persists. Every production of the 2013/14 Broadway season had at least one famous person among its ranks, a fact underscored by the commensurate Tony Awards telecast, when celebrities such as Samuel L. Jackson and Lucy Liu presented honors to the likes of Bryan Cranston (HBO's *Breaking Bad*) and Neil Patrick Harris (*How I Met Your Mother*). Guest appearances by Sting and Jennifer Hudson further demonstrated this practice. In Hudson's case, she was pitching a song from the musical version of the hit film *Finding Neverland*, which was playing at the American Repertory Theatre at the time and later opened on Broadway that ensuing fall. It is ironic, however, that Hudson was hired solely for the Tony telecast and was never in the production. Other Hollywood stars that graced Broadway stages that season included Glenn Close (*A Delicate Balance*), Bradley Cooper (*The Elephant Man*), and Hugh Jackman (*The River*). Trying to bank on the symbolic capital of Hollywood, the Tony Awards telecast also featured Kevin Bacon, Rosie O'Donnell, Tina Fey, and Ethan Hawke, among numerous others. Perhaps the most incongruous star to appear was the iconic Clint Eastwood, who was so out of sorts that he butchered the name of the venerable stage director Darko Tresnjak and mistook the final titular word in the drama *The Cripple of Innishman* for "Irishman." Two rather perplexing errors, given that Eastwood had the seemingly simple charge of merely reading the teleprompter and contents of the winning envelope, a two-minute action that a little bit of rehearsal could have adequately prepared him to execute. Unfortunately, the show was live and he had no chance to cut his flawed performance in favor of a second take. Perhaps the larger question is: Why was Eastwood presenting in the first place? He is not a theatre professional, a fact made all the more apparent by his bungled presentation.

During the same telecast Rosie O'Donnell recalled her youth to describe how she first fell in love with theatre: "Hollywood was vague and an illusion, but Broadway was real." Her privileging of "reality" can be read with unintended irony in that the illusory and imaginative essence of theatre, especially as it pertains to the work of actors, is often displaced by the spectacle of celebrity; theatre's embracement of reality is—to borrow from Adorno—of the empirical or pedestrian variety, thereby discounting any chance to achieve a product steeped in wonder, spirit, and shared celebration. The unconscious desire of theatregoers—a drive that is socially induced—is projected onto the figure of the celebrity, whose presence therein is filtered through her image, which has been produced, distributed and consumed through the mass media. The object of desire is therefore not the play, its actors, or the theatrical event, but the star performer and her symbolic worth to an audience of doting fans. It is a phenomenon owed to the fetishized forces of capitalism and has precious little to with stage acting or the aesthetic of theatre.

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- [1] Adam Hetrick, "Nora Ephron's *Lucky Guy*, Starring Tom Hanks, Ends Broadway Run, July 3<sup>rd</sup>," *Playbill.com*, <http://www.playbill.com/news/article/179720-Nora-Ephrons-Lucky-Guy-Starring-Tom-Hanks-Ends-Broadway-Run-July-3> (accessed 15 January 2014).
- [2] Guy DeBord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, MI: Black and Red, 1983), sec. 42.
- [3] For more on the cultural consumption of celebrities, see Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, *Starstruck: the Business of Celebrity* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2010); and Daniel Herwitz, *The Star as Icon: Celebrity in the Age of Mass Consumption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).
- [4] Ben Brantley, "Old-School Newsmen, After Deadline: Tom Hanks in 'Lucky Guy' at the Broadhurst Theatre," *New York Times*, 1 April 2013.
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