

The Hollywood Monster: A Cult of Celebrity

BY ERIN PHELAN

IT'S SATURDAY night and the Toronto International Film Festival is in full swing. A huge crowd has gathered outside the Four Seasons hotel. Anticipation fills the air as strangers whisper to one another, wondering who will emerge from behind the darkened windows of the limousine.

CTV television personality Elaine Lui and I are nearby in The Hazelton Hotel when we see a mob pass the windows: Brad and Angelina have been spotted heading to dinner! A few hours later, the crowd has grown like fungus. As the famous couple get into their car, the mob advances;

seven people leap on the hood and a woman thrusts her baby against the car window, saying to security: "I just want my baby to see Brad!"

Welcome to the world of celebrity obsession. Tabloids scream out at the checkout line, celebrity scandals spool on CNN, and the popularity of celebrity-gossip websites such as TMZ.com and Lui's LaineYGossip.com is growing. Lui sees the celebrity frenzy firsthand during this festival. "I was working the red carpet for Matt Damon's charity event," she says, "and a woman across the street was shouting and sobbing, 'Matt! Matt!' She was wailing at the top of her lungs."

ILLUSTRATED BY PABLO PASSADAS



It appears that Hollywood has created a monster that is out of control. Jake Halpern, author of the 2007 book *Fame Junkies*, believes there are a number of factors working together that explain the phenomenon. For one thing, he says, "Movies and television, magazines and websites make a hefty chunk of profit peddling news about celebrities. You see the crossover of 'soft' news into 'hard' news venues—celebrity coverage on CNN, for example—because advertisers are demanding the higher ratings that often come with celebrity coverage."

So, are we asking for it or is it forced on us? Halpern believes it's a bit of both.

"We lead ever more isolated lives, and we've created parasocial relationships with people we see on TV and in the movies to fill a void. Not

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only do celebrities make us feel less lonely, they also give us something to talk about. I may not know you and you may not know me, but we both know Tom and Katie—in effect, they help us connect with one another. They also live more glamorous lives than us, which is a form of escapism."

UNDENIABLY, the Hollywood monster has developed an insatiable appetite. Figures show that magazines reporting on lifestyles of the rich and famous increased their circulation numbers by roughly ten percent in the last year; during the first half of 2007, one magazine, *OK! Weekly*, saw a 54 percent jump, while traditional newsmagazine *Time* suffered a 17 percent dip. Shows such as *eTalk*, on which Lui appears, average 460,000 viewers a night.

As if magazines, television and movies weren't enough, the Internet has completely altered the nature of celebrity gossip: Information is now free, instantaneous and ubiquitous. In 2006, celebrity-gossip websites had a remarkable 30 percent increase in web traffic. Technorati, a company that tracks websites, says that of the 107 million blogs they index, six of the Top 100 have a celebrity focus. Infamous celebrity blogger Perez Hilton updates his site several times a day.

Celebrities are also sold to us on a first-name basis. One of the most popular sections of *UsWeekly* is the spread featuring stars being "just like

us"—photos of them grocery shopping or picking their kids up from school. This triggers something else, says University of British Columbia psychology professor Mark Schaller.

"At a quick-and-dirty psychological level, we may respond to celebrities as though they are faux family," speculates Schaller. "Research shows that thoughts and feelings that connote kinship may be automatically activated by perfect strangers, as long as those strangers have characteristics that we associate with family, such as high levels of both similarity and familiarity. We 'encounter' certain high-profile celebrities regularly—every time we pick up a copy of *People* or put in a DVD—and thus respond to them as though they are kin, even when we know they aren't."

But don't let a photograph deceive you. Those photos of celebrities doing "everyday things" are often staged. "Nothing in Hollywood is a coincidence," says Lui. "They don't get paid 20 million dollars a movie unless we care. They become like an investment, and we demand they give us something back: I want to know who you're dating; I want to see pictures of your baby. Without the paparazzi, we wouldn't care."

So why do we care? Research shows us that we want to know about—and emulate—prestigious, successful people. "In contemporary

culture, status and prestige are conferred not only by high levels of power and skill, but also by mere celebrity," suggests Schaller. "Even when the celebrity has no obvious smarts or skills, we still want to keep tabs on them."

Interestingly, in his research Halpern uncovered an evolutionary explanation for our focus on the rich and powerful. A 2005 study highlighted in his book found that monkeys would give up food to stare at photos of the dominant monkeys in their group. The theory is that, for survival and procreation, less powerful monkeys need to be tuned into all the social information about those at the centre of attention. This "watching gene" has, the theory goes, been passed down to us. The problem now is that "we're hard-wired to stare at

images of Tom Cruise jumping up and down on a couch," says Halpern, "fascinated by every last detail of this powerful person at the centre of attention. The old mechanism is still firing, we're still watching, but it is empty for us."

University of Western Ontario media studies professor Tim Blackmore agrees that we are still primates in essence, focused on the tribe and grooming rituals. But he notes that there is risk in the obsessive focus of celebrity and entertainment journalism. "The public has been trained by MTV or equally fast-moving pro-

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gramming," says Blackmore. "They aren't about to switch to difficult stories about people they've never met in Africa or the Middle East. What this says about us is that we're less tolerant of 'reality' than ever, an increasingly dangerous trend."

SUE HLEDIN, 38, an account manager from Hudson, Que., visits celebrity-gossip websites daily. "The 'real' news can be depressing," she says. "In my mind, celebrity daily routines are so far from my reality that I view them as I do a trashy novel: a light, fluffy, beach read. I treat them as characters and not real people." Still, she's embarrassed by her celebrity obsession. "Unfortunately, the media is responding to idiots like me who eat this crap up. Obviously there is lots of money to be made feeding my addiction."

In researching *Fame Junkies*, Halpern learned that the three major networks in the United States devoted more "news" time in 2004 to covering people like Martha Stewart and Michael Jackson than they did to the crisis in Darfur.

Not only that, many members of the younger generation have developed a fixation on the famous—and actually aspire towards this lifestyle

themselves. Halpern conducted a study of some 650 American teenagers, asking them if they would rather be stronger, more beautiful, smarter—or famous. Its results showed that boys valued fame as much as intelligence, and girls actually valued it more than intelligence. When asked if they would rather become a U.S. senator or a celebrity's personal assistant—you know, the person who picks up the dry cleaning—the leaders of tomorrow opted to be close to the stars by a ratio of three to one.

One look at any reality or talent show is proof enough our kids want their spot in the sun. Over one year, auditions for *Canadian Idol* ballooned 81 percent.

"If you asked people on the street if celebrity is out of control, they would likely say 'yes,'" Halpern says. "But if you asked them if it was doing any harm they would probably say 'not really.' Yet you have all these young people who want to be famous or stars, while the notion of perfecting a skill is secondary to that. If you have a society of people who are narcissistic, you end up with an entitlement generation, people wanting not to have to work that hard but wanting star status. That ain't a good thing."

MAYBE I'LL STICK WITH BROCCOLI

Lewis Black discovered that candy corn is the only treat in America never to have been advertised. "And there's a reason," he says. "All the candy corn that was ever made was made in 1911."

Canadians Afar Still Close to Home

The accent is a constant reminder of where one hails from

BY HEIDI KINGSTONE

FROM THE GLOBE AND MAIL

RECENT controversy about dual citizenship has some Canadians wondering about their place in the world. When three Canadians started chatting in a café in Cape Town, South Africa, on a sunny day not long ago, we realized we were the manifestation of what it means to be Canadian.

The three of us, Katherine, Zeina and I, are Canadians who live abroad. There we were—a naturalized Canadian, a first-generation and a second-generation Canadian—living in far-flung corners of the world, yet united by a sense of being Canadian.

We had met in what was once the most artificially and brutally segregated country in the world, having just attended the wedding of our



Katherine in Beirut