Guest Column

Epilogue: Celebrity's Face Book

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celebrity*: late 14c., "solemn rite or ceremony," from O.Fr.* celebrité *"celebration," from L.* celibritatem *(nom.* celebritas*) "multitude, fame," from* celeber *"frequented, populous." Meaning "condition of being famous" is from c. 1600; that of "famous person" is from 1849.*

—Online Etymology Dictionary

The human gaze has a power of conferring value on things; but it makes them cost more too.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

CELEBRITY RELIES ON A GAZE, A COLLECTIVE OR PUBLIC REGARD that, in gazing, confers value. Celebrity also demands a face to celebrate—faciality is a sine qua non of "celebrification." The historian Peter Brown demonstrates in *The Cult of the Saints* that late antiquity introduced the overriding importance of saints' images, bodies, relics, or tomb sites in a Christian worship that emphasized the mediation of saints between heaven and earth and in place of angels; celebrity had its origins in the woodcut portraits and wayside shrines that proliferated as well as in the professionally wrought iconic images of the saints. Against David Hume's judgment of this phenomenon as "vulgar" and a remnant of pagan folk religion, he argues that the rise of the cult of the saints was as influenced by elites, including Augustine, as by supposedly lesser folk, and that the latter, especially women and the poor, were thus able to participate in a democratizing of culture profoundly indebted to graveside practices that promoted personal relationships, even friendships, with the dead saints and the circulation of their faces in imagery and their body parts as relics (17). Moreover, far from introducing vulgarity into

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Christian rituals, Brown shows how the cult was imbued with the culture of classical antiquity and with values associated with Athenian democracy and the philosophy of nous, a nonrational intelligence linking us to the divine (48). That we deploy the term *celebrity icon* for such figures as Oprah or Angelina Jolie only underscores the vestiges of public religious ritual that remain embedded in celebrity practices and the nimbus of the sacred that haloes even seemingly debased celebrity discourses.

I summon the sacred to begin the discussion of celebrity where it belongs: in the realm of faces, because the possession of a face (or its disembodied extension, a voice), even or especially if mechanically reproduced, is a limit case for celebrity. When multiplied into the constellations of celebrity that constitute our saints' books these days, the celebrity face in its irreplaceable immediacy still stands in for or designates a celebrity-anointed personhood, irrespective of whether the body is celebrated. Celebrity has, or is, a face, and the facing off of celebrity practice—examples of which range from the cult of saints to rituals of potlatch and the rise of social media forms such as *Facebook*—is the face value of celebrity itself.

Theories of celebrity emphasize a celebrity logic, heightening the aspects of contemporary celebrity that are inseparable from capital flows and the commoditizing, or monetizing, of the celebrity image. I enjoin instead a celebrity poetics, a celebrity noetics, even a celebrity forensics to counter the cloud of unknowing—or disavowal—that arises in the face of celebrity. Celebrity annuls the subject-object distinction that is the basis for most critical analysis, even as it insists on the affective dimension inherent in celebrity knowledge. Plato, in the *Timaeus*, offers a locus classicus for distinguishing the mode of knowledge inspirited by and inseparable from emotion that he terms nous, rather than the chillier epistemes of logos informing the dialectic. Plato insists on the primacy of nous, however dangerous it may be, given its appeal to ardent emotions and literary persuasion; this mode of understanding operates primarily through rhetoric charged with an emotional power that intertwines with and furthers its brand of knowledge. Nous is thought that embraces, seduces, and impels, that relies on collectivity and on charismatic transmission; it is enfolding, not coercive, and intimates an epistemic union that is a harbinger of Spinoza's immanent world, where all things and thoughts are God. Remarkably, nous offers an excursus into the valences of celebrity, a mode of social knowledge that is persuasive, immanent, and paradoxical all at once. Celebrity also transcends the divide between the quick and the dead, in much the same way as the cult of the saints erased the borders of heaven and earth.

Celebrity can be seen as an economy of sorts, but not the zero-sum or scarcity economy of privation or "vulgarity" to which it is most often annexed. The moral judgment so often enmeshed in critical explorations of celebrity follows both a religious and a utilitarian calculus requiring a justification for celebrity that should inhere in talent or good works; when celebrity lacks this, its persistence is charted as either the decadent, bread-and-circuses endpoint of capitalism or the final bonfire of the vanities. Instead, celebrity can be seen as a complex practice that is literature by other means: a socially authored and ever-changing pointillist narrative that, despite appearances to the contrary, is yoked to increasing democratization, the accelerated inclusion of marginal groups, and the creative and usually demotic deployment of new media. While cults of personality are enforced and the faces of Mao and Castro do pervade their nations, celebrity nous cannot be coerced on demand. Compare, for example, the self-imposed cult status of Muʿammar Gadhafi to the celebrity face of Che Guevara, whose celebrity in death circulates irrespective of political dictates and arises because his celebrity face in its many translations across art, media,

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and political and geographic boundaries has the meaning of its many uses, including the signaling of a democratically radical aesthetic. This last meaning is a marker of the booklike quality of modern celebrity: it engenders a sacral act of social assemblage or mass noesis, one that perforce acknowledges temporality, offers a poetics of death in life, and above all entails the eternal recurrence of what Nietzsche posited as "creative destruction" (20–28). The iconicity central to celebrity making and its imagery extends to the mass authorship of the celebrity mosaic, the freeze-frame medallion of history that a celebrity assemblage constitutes. Even those who repudiate individual celebrity auras or who dismiss the church of celebrity altogether participate in the iconic assemblage, in that churches thrive on apostasy and require heretics to move forward. Insisting on the literariness of the celebrity phenomenon and on the numinous aspects of its social rituals doesn't obviate the connections of the celebrity machine to the politics of capital, yet disavowing the former leaves the profound engagement of celebrity in and as a social book—that is, a face book—unexplored.

I begin with a transatlantic moment that allows a peek at celebrity's face just as the multiform practices of modernity are emerging to shape its lineaments. George Bernard Shaw was twenty-three at this incipient moment, living in Ireland, not only not celebrated but also obscure, anonymous, and unaware of the transcendent power of his initials. He answered an ad placed by Edison's fledgling telephone company, hoping to convert Ireland to its miraculous new medium. Shaw was struck by the telephone's potential as a multiplier of modernity and applied to be a canvasser, saying that the telephone was a tangible part of civilization he wanted to help spread. Shaw's job was to persuade local people to allow the totemic telephone poles to be set up on their property, a task that demanded exceptional powers of persuasion coupled with a visionary's technological insight. Shaw had both, and after six months he was manager of Edison's Irish right-of-way office. When Edison and Bell merged forces, Shaw opted out of commercial life in favor of firsthand media participation as playwright, critic, and political activist. After his involvement with telephonic modernity, Shaw continued to be a vanguard celebrity in the introduction of new media—for example, he was chosen to give the first radio broadcast to the Union of South Africa after World War I (Holroyd 27–36).

Shaw had a face for radio, to be sure, but his celebrity face in the sense of this argument is not literally his homely, whiskered visage but rather a transcendental face, which represents the incorporated nature of personhood in a mediated public sphere. This process of becoming a celebrity face operates as a *sparagmos* in reverse—where *sparagmos* entails the ritual dismemberment of the body of an animal, a sacrificed human, or even a god, as in the Dionysian mysteries and maenadic worship, often followed by consumption of the bodily parts, or *omophagia*, a fate shared by Orpheus and Medea's brother and seen by some as an origin of the Eucharist. Run the putative film of a *sparagmos* in reverse (Pier Paolo Pasolini tried to film such a scene, while in the film of Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer* its Saint Sebastian–like hero suffers *sparagmos* just outside camera range), and the torn pieces of a profaned body come together and are made whole, a bloody yet holy mosaic, divine in its reconstitution. The existence of a public to reverse the metaphoric dismemberment is required, a body politic primed to recognize and receive the imprint of an incorporeal yet necessarily embodied celebrity "faceprint," to coin a term by analogy to the fingerprint and its similar enmeshing in the technologies and body artistry of modernity. At the intangible interface where the public—as mediated body, as sphere—and the numinous celebrity face conjoin, they bring each other into being. This reciprocity sutures together the fragmented celebrity face, across

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its myriad imperfect and partial instantiations, in order that it emerge whole and radiant. Shaw as the local face of the telephone goes on to translate into a parable about celebrity as the agent or herald of modernity, a face that covers not flesh and bones but, as Spinoza might have put it, a "thing" that is identical with the energy and life force it can bestow (60–63). Moreover, this transitional phase of celebrity's face book had to pass through a literary zone, given that literature was an earlier mode of social magic, not outmoded but able to lend its magic book—the literary creation of alternative fictional worlds and the authorizing star power of the authorial signature to conjure their characters and things into being—to give credence to the new technologies that will extend celebrity's brand as well as its hierophantic manifestations.

If such mediations are forgotten and all celebrity is conceived on a continuum, a continuation of the untenable high-low divide erupts, with high or deserving celebrities on the one hand and low or unmeritorious celebrity culture that celebrates the unworthy for simply being famous on the other. Celebrity doesn't work as if it were a three-ring circus with dedicated circles for elite, middlebrow, and proletarian celebrities to enter on a trisected limelight. Rather, celebrity is the whole ball of wax, Mandeville's hive incarnate, the interface or interstice where a celebrity pandemonium emerges—no James Franco without The Situation, no Lady Gaga without Snooki. The chief explanatory logic of celebrity is often thought to be commodity fetishism, deplored or explicated thereby as inauthentic, superficial, contaminating, perverse, or delusional, a mechanism for the maintenance of hegemony, class control through identificatory means. By this logic, a handful of people in a given moment have celebrity thrust upon them, and in the network of their celebrity status they are marketed or market themselves for pure exchange value. When celebrity is read through the prism of discrete celebrities, the fetish explanation of the individual celebrity as a commodity in a publicity market looms largest. Lost in this explanation is any conjuring with the phenomenological collectivity of celebrity, the mobility and immanence and even agency of celebrity's face. Leo Braudy's magisterial *Fame: The Frenzy of Renown* situates the precursors of modern celebrity in literature, among other domains, as part of an ongoing discourse of fame, while Joseph Roach's fascinating recent book *It*, in exploring charisma as a phenomenon that overlaps with literary and cultural fame, also remains focused on the signature rather than the face of celebrity. Of course, as Joshua Gamson, Graeme Turner, and, more recently, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett assert, celebrity must be seen as a system and, even beyond that, as a diacritical or relational system akin to Ferdinand de Saussure's *langue*. The diacritical system is crucial: celebrities mean in relation to other celebrities, not in isolation. Their significance, one that many decry as empty, is predicated on the system that circulates them. Their meaning is their use, to echo Ludwig Wittgenstein, who was himself channeling William James on the contingency of all value, but not, therefore, the relativity of value or comparative insignificance (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* 23). For James as for Wittgenstein, value matters, and signifies, however it is arrived at, in all its varieties; Wittgenstein's love of murderous American crime films was as sacred as his love of mathematics. If we insert a celebrity noetics into its bare logic, the gnostic strand determining what Brown calls "the imaginative dialectic" between everyday life and a mysterious yet sanctified life beyond it comes back into play (79). Both James's foray into a radical empiricism that includes noetic, nonrational ways of knowing at its heart and Wittgenstein's philosophical investigation of language games as forms of life, as in prayer or film going, offer what could be called literary-theoretical understandings of celebrity's book of life.

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The conservative indictment (Boorstin; Postman) joins hands with Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's lament from the left that the culture industry churns out celebrity faces as mere empty counters. No one is, in fact, famous simply for being famous, even for as little as Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes. Celebrification happens for a reason, when a celebrity dynamic summons into being, sustains, and finally extinguishes a palimpsestic celebrity choir whose voices resonate only in dialectical unison. These bare ruined choirs are not composed only of disparate individual celebrities who stand side by side, as it were, a conjoined cohort wearing the common robe of celebrity. Celebrity is more ductile and dialogic than this formulation, because in celebrity those listening and present are singing celebrity into being by the silent speech act of their witnessing gaze. Gazing in critical discourse is regarded as static or, if mobile, is so only for nefarious purposes of surveillance and domination. Celebrity cannot exist except that the public gaze, a public witnessing, makes it so. The spirit flashes over, the saint's visage becomes numinous, carries meaning, and celebrity appears in a kairos moment that evades time's linearity.

To describe the form this witnessing enacts requires turning to recent ritual logics like those of the cult of the saints cited earlier. The nineteenth- and twentieth-century Native American tribal rituals of the Pacific Northwest, singularly termed *potlatch* by anthropologists, stand among the most spectacular aggregations of ritualized public meaning we know about and exemplify the meaning as use that emanates from collective witness and noetic emotion. They have much the same sociocultural resonance as Mikhail Bakhtin saw in carnival in its many global manifestations, including, in his view, the genre of the novel. With a detour into potlatch I hope to give traction to the argument about celebrity's face book, since potlatch was as an elaborate and extended social practice that unfolded over time and that was translated into living tribal memory through stories, songs, dances, props, jokes, and renaming. The gift economy of the Kwakiutl and Tlingit potlatch was described by the anthropologist Franz Boas in 1886; *potlatch* was the name for ritual encampments held several times a year, within a tribe or by rival tribes, that became public spectacles of symbolic transformation. One element of potlatch involved building a pile of precious goods—food, religious objects, jewels, property, and money—and either giving them away or setting the pile on fire, both of which served to demonstrate the wealth and prowess of the chief who could make this expenditure, which in turn called for an equivalent gesture of disposal. Far more than a ritual destruction of objects, potlatch was a site of oratory, an exchange point for the symbolic creation and then destruction of a shared linguistic world, where names were among the most precious gifts, along with songs and dances named after participants or featuring them, in transfigured form, as characters or mythic avatars; political negotiation emerged from aesthetic creation in a performative politics that placed great responsibility in the act of witnessing as an engaged and interactive audience. Zones of reversal and retaliation occurred within the solemn ritual moment, a kairos of in-between time similar to celebrity's moment. The whole assemblage of performances, readings, props, pranks, ceremonies, and sometimes deliberate wasting of goods constituted the potlatch narrative, or book, that gave the event its shared significance and made stars of its chiefs and humbler participants. All these elements made potlatch resemble, in a concentrated and undeniably culture-specific format, the mass-authored and mass-mediated ritual of celebrity book construction I am limning here. Never culturally pure, potlatch practices coexisted with a European presence, and most tribal members were wage laborers in local factories. When Edward Curtis came to photograph potlatch in 1900, he had to get waivers for

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native people to costume themselves in outlawed potlatch garb; once they were dressed, he refused to photograph them, deriding their global motley as inauthentic, with its machine-produced clothing and talismans bearing brand names, advertising, and celebrity endorsements, which had made a proud appearance in potlatch (Gidley 178–84). So too does celebrity's book have its trash and elements of deliberate waste or expenditure, its fool's gold amid its unalloyed stardom.

Marcel Mauss, in *The Gift*, analyzes the North American Indian potlatch ceremonies as exemplary gift economies and designated the rituals he observed "total social facts," capable of bringing the disparate aspects of social life together in a system of complex and indivisible relations through performance and witness. He writes, "All these phenomena are at once legal, economic, religious, and even aesthetic, etc. . . . What is more, these institutions have an important aesthetic side to them . . . the dances that are carried out alternatively, the chants and parades of all kinds, the dramatic performances that are given . . . everything is a cause for aesthetic emotion" (83). Thorstein Veblen introduced potlatch to the parlance of early sociology in his account of conspicuous consumption, which he thought it resembled; later potlatch volatilizes into the dark spray of expenditure or surplus in Georges Bataille's proposal of potlatch as an alternative economy that is spiritually superior to capitalism (29–32); it lives on as a countervailing term in social theory, in the binary opposing traditional societies based on ritual, honor, and gift economies to modernity, wherein rationalization replaces status and routinization substitutes for ritual, purged of the enchantment of ceremony. The repression of potlatch began almost simultaneously with its prominence in the disciplinary formation of economics, anthropology, and sociology. When potlatch was banned, it went underground, and its more baroque elements, especially the destruction of goods in a bonfire of expenditure, were accentuated in reaction to its proscription. Tribes under such pressure preferred to burn goods, including symbolic objects, or throw them into the sea instead of having their property confiscated outright. The governor of Alaska carried out an order banning potlatch in 1904 on grounds that it was "wasteful" (Cole and Chaikin 54), although one might ask, for whom?

Not strictly native, potlatch was a social form open to the world, an instance of globalism *avant la lettre*, and the legal objection to it had more to do with an insistence that goods circulated in potlatch should be licensed, sold, and taxed by the state. There was fear that potlatch could serve as model for an alternative political economy resembling democratic socialism—the notion of mutual indebtedness is the primary speech act of potlatch. Moreover, as a ritual performance, it was viewed through the lens of Gustav Le Bon's thesis of the stupidity and violence of crowds, exacerbated in this case by racism; potlatch emanated whiffs of the uncontrollable mass culture that has exasperated sociopolitical theory ever since, until recent acknowledgment of what sometimes appears to be a democratic wisdom of the crowd.

Celebrity can be read as a corollary to this heterogeneous social assemblage. Otherwise mystifying phenomena relating to the cultural dynamic of celebrity come into relief in the light of the economy of excess and sacrifice entailed by potlatch, especially the quasi-literary totalization, the complete fictional worlds, that it enacted. Potlatch is a gripping reminder that a system need not be limited to signification, not mapped onto a singular market, not reducible to the agency of individuals or the resistant uses of the group; it is a total social fact that requires above all an aesthetic evaluation against a shifting calculus of competition, reciprocity, sacrifice, destruction, negotiation, experiential transformation, and metamorphosis through worship. Celebrity's homology with potlatch is not perfect and to some degree is an artifact

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of the same modern discourses that brought potlatch into the world's gaze as a dance of death for indigenous societies condemned to extinction. Seen in this light, as a total social fact with some autonomy from pure market forces or from a singular ideological valence, celebrity becomes modernity's ritual nexus, its collection of faces that, like saints in the cults of late antiquity, are brought out of obscurity to shine their facial lighting on modernity's diverse needs, desires, and identities, revealed through celebrity's facial pageantry, its performance, its sacrament, its ceremonies of value.

The potlatch model of celebrity acknowledges that celebrity is about the strange tunnels or wormholes that violate and disrupt the systemic theory of celebrity and that seek to draw attention to the plenum, the performance within which celebrity is overdetermined as spiritual, political, profane, magical, and mundane. Celebrity is not a property or substance nor even, in a more supple sense, an exchange. It is a distinctive amalgam of production, consumption, and distribution. This conflation is what made potlatch so inflammatory to legal, political, religious, educational, and military authorities. Modes of production are inseparable from vectors of consumption, and distribution is an intimate part of both and cannot be stripped away as an autonomous zone of middlemen—civil society and the state. Celebrities are hailed into being, and, while the celebrity so fanned into life from this public spark may be risible or evanescent, this act is to analogous flare-ups such as revolution or revival. Moreover, potlatch has a global horizon that is problematic precisely for these reasons of control—it is enormously difficult, if not impossible, to mandate celebrity. We can cordon off separate celebrity universes to track the circulation of celebrity value within them; there remains an excess in any local celebrity system, a valence attuned to a more global orbit of possibility. The diacritics of celebrity only happens in the hurly-burly that would allow the profane to be interlaced with the sacred, the pratfall to be a political act, the very address of enunciation to be in doubt. It partakes of the unbridled gift economy of potlatch, the total social fact wherein the good, bad, and ugly of celebrity become its redemptive trinity, the three-in-one of celebrity's face.

A brave schoolgirl once accosted Shaw at the theater and asked for his autograph. He replied, "Certainly not, and if you are going to collect autographs you will come to a bad end!" "What a frightful nuisance," she sighed, turning away (qtd. in Holroyd 243). Walter Benjamin writes about the collector: "[I]nside him there are spirits, or at least little genii, which have seen to it that for a real collector . . . ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him—it is he who lives in them" (59). Benjamin's genies reverse the typical ethical judgment that celebrity and celebrity objects are diminished, inauthentic, fallen things, the dregs of commodity fetishism. Celebrity requires not just a system of differentiations or distinctions in which it signifies: celebrity takes place in and as potlatch, part of a panorama or performance that is integrative, creative, destructive, collective and collected—a total social fact. Celebrity has to reach beyond the putative audience for celebrities or it becomes a mere system of taste or merit, a subculture, a hall of fame, a museum, or a canon, all of which indeed overlap with celebrity. But celebrity puts the melting pot into potlatch: it is a container, a conduit, a display, and even an exacting sacrificial economy of almost pure expenditure, where the proximity of brighter lights to lesser ones sparks the celebrity catalysis, the alighting of the genie. Celebrity's face book is also a book of the dead, or nearly so. The blazon of light of an individual celebrity has to pass over, evanesce, surrender almost immediately to time's passage. The portal to transformation opened up by a celebrity face is literally momentary and momentarily literary: the

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mayfly ephemerality of an individual celebrity face coincides with a transitory literariness, since that face reads as iconic only in relation to the necessarily volatile celebrity face book that surrounds its moment in time. Celebrity in that regard is something of a house of fiction, a collectively constructed memory palace whose rooms contain strange bedfellows linked in a numinous narrative.

I conclude with a face-book moment of celebrity time, whose faces are preserved in an amber made lucent by strobe lights and limelight and are framed by the persistence of literal literature, in the form of books and plays no less than the frisson of literary celebrity at this transitional turn of modernity's gears. The congeries of celebrity at any given moment will enact the ritual assemblage of celebrity's ever-changing book and offer a medallion of the total social fact that extends forward and backward in time, in and through the various mediated wormholes of modern celebrity's being. When Shaw died, displayed on the mantelpiece was not his Nobel Prize but his Oscar for best screenplay adaptation, won for the 1934 film *My Fair Lady*, adapted from *Pygmalion*. Shaw's hybrid literary and mass-mediated celebrity had become instrumental in cinema well before that Oscar, beginning when he was asked by Movietone Studios to film a trailer meant to explain the new medium of talking films to silent film audiences. Shaw adored talkies, as his plays might hint. His miniature talkie depicts him as a talking head, remarking topically that although his face and Mussolini's were somewhat alike, Mussolini could never stop frowning, whereas Shaw was able to do so at will. He then smiles like the Cheshire Cat, inducting audiences into celebrity modernity and the world of talking pictures through the magical intercession of his writerly smile. Like the shock of Greta Garbo's laugh on camera, the alembic of celebrity gave Shaw an oxymoronic face for cinema.

Shaw attended the British premiere of *My Fair Lady*, ironically a talking picture taken from his play about a man teaching a woman to talk, at the Odeon Theatre, Marble Arch. Celebrity in all its guises constellated in the golden kairos of the premiere as a medallion of history, a potlatch moment, a total social fact spun from celebrity's face book. Queen Mary and her entourage arrived in the royal coach to see the movie, and the legendary traffic jam that resulted as royals collided with common folk in the streets, the former giving way, was a prelude in a sense to the wreckage of noblesse oblige. Sitting in the Odeon box with Shaw and his wife were their close friends T. E. Lawrence, Lawrence of Arabia by celebrity name, to whom the Shaws had just made what was to be the fatal gift of a motorcycle and who was taking an intermission from trying behind the scenes to wrest Egypt free from British control; the Fabian socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb, on the cusp of consolidating the Labour Party from the Fabian socialist movement and founding the London School of Economics as a site of the critique of modern political economy and a Keynesian bastion; Gertrude Lawrence, the first international superstar of stage and screen, of Cockney background and among the most sexually daring feminists of her time; and one Apsley Cherry-Garrard, hugely celebrated as a survivor of Robert Scott's ill-fated 1910–13 expedition to the Antarctic and the author of the still-classic travel book recording the doomed voyage, *The Worst Journey in the World* (1922), a nail in the coffin of the British Empire. Hugh Grant played Cherry-Garrard in a 1994 BBC film, by which time *The Worst Journey in the World* was seminal to the environmental movement; Grant has now become the celebrity face of the phone-hacking scandal affecting the Rupert Murdoch media empire and the British government alike, a reprise of Shaw's role as celebrity proselytizer for the phone, this time as the medium's celebrity victim. Galvanized, shot through with the unexpected networks of

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affiliation, exchange, and transformation set into motion by and through celebrity, this assemblage of celebrity faces announces a transition from the literariness of celebrity and the book it writes to its proliferation in all the media of modernity, analog and digital. The contingencies of value created by the gaze at the assembled celebrity potlatch reverberate to this moment, a compass rose of social value.

Celebrity's potlatch comes full circle, creating and destroying celebrity's face book, a book of the living and the dead.

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