

An Interview with Leo Braudy

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In *The Frenzy of Renown* you take a broad historical look at fame, suggesting that it is not something new—“...fame has a past as well as a present. We did not invent fame.”—but that it changes over time. What has changed in the nature of fame since you wrote your book? How would you revise, update, or expand on your history of fame in light of what has taken place in our culture over the last twenty years?

The most obvious change in the nature of fame over the last twenty or so years has been the increasing self-consciousness among the audience, the media, and the famous about the process, and the desire to stage that self-consciousness as part of the general staging of fame itself. Whereas in the past these processes were generally invisible or seemingly transparent, now they have become part of the story. Fame still has something of the magical quality of seeming to radiate from the famous person, but the knowing audience is also aware of and specifically made alert to the presence of publicists, spin doctors, paparazzi, and all the rest of the backstage and off-camera entourage that facilitates the creation of modern celebrity. Comments on both how the new sports star and movie phenomenon of the moment are handling their newfound fame and how public and/or media adulation has burdened their private lives have become obligatory parts of the story—ways to demonstrate their own self-awareness by both buying into fame culture and ostentatiously disdaining it. Brandishing this same self-consciousness has also led the media to assume that their stories have depth. Newspapers and magazines that never would have printed celebrity gossip in the past now feature it prominently because through irony or distance they believe they can present it as something more than mere gossip. This is the dark downside of cultural studies: anything is significant because anything can be interpreted.

Leo Braudy is University Professor and Bing Professor of English at the University of Southern California. The author of the often-quoted book on celebrity culture, *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*, he is a frequent commentator on matters of fame and popular culture. Braudy's most recent book is *From Chivalry to Terrorism: War and the Changing Nature of Masculinity*.

You suggest that “the history of fame is also the history of the shifting definition of achievement in the social world” and the history of how a society understands what an individual is and could be. What does the recent history of fame suggest about our social definitions of achievement and about what it means to be an individual?

The omnipresence of the visual media in our daily lives, the incessant spray of images from movies, television, magazines, and newspapers has indissolubly welded fame and visibility together. The saintly desire to be unknown to the metropolitan world, or the romantic artist’s plea that his works will live only if he be forgotten, has been swept decisively away. Few contemporary flowers blush unseen and waste their fragrance on the desert air. In this climate, the idea that someone might be famous but her face be unfamiliar seems terminally paradoxical. Visibility *is* fame; being on television validates one’s existence as a movie star, politician, thinker, or swallower of semitropical worms.

You refer to the “various insanities to which individuals have been driven by the lust for recognition.” Do you think reality television is merely one more example of this, or is something else going on with this phenomenon?

Reality television has two main characteristics. For the producers, it pragmatically allows them to dispense with all that expensive above-the-line talent like writers and actors. For the audience, it allows a voyeuristic view of “people just like us” being strong and/or humiliated. In intriguing ways, as on, say, *American Idol*, they preserve the by-your-bootstraps, anyone-can-make-it side of fame in a world when the famous are more and more very different from you and me, rather than the same. Unlike on the confessional talk shows, the “real people” on the show don’t have to bare their souls about various illegal or immoral goings on; they just have to be willing to be subjected to whatever deceptions and dangers the producers think up. Why are such shows popular? Partially, I think it’s that possibility of identification, empathy, and superiority: “I could do that a lot better.” Do they represent a turning away from traditional storytelling? To a certain extent, but their resources are a lot more limited than those of traditional storytelling, and I expect their audiences will drop off, and their situations get desperately more grotesque. Already dramatic shows like *Lost* have taken some of the reality show elements and turned them into more intriguing old-style stories, along the lines of the old disaster films: “we’re all in this together and we’d better learn to get along.”

You highlight a number of tensions inherent in the idea of fame: between the private and the public, between an individual’s uniqueness and his/her familiarity, between fame as freedom and fame as scripted, between the need to admire and the need to find a scapegoat. Could you say more about these tensions inherent in the mechanisms of fame?

Fame from the start has existed at the crossroads of contradictions, in particular the line between life and death. In a world where the prime medium of expression was words, to continue to speak of someone who was dead and recount their deeds as if they were alive constituted real fame. But now, of course, the fame that is only conferred after death is sought for almost exclusively while one is still alive. So the tensions become even more acute. To stand out of the crowd but with the crowd's approval, to be different without losing the common touch, is the essence of democratic fame in particular, with all the inherent pitfalls of those mixed motives.

What is the connection between fame, honor, and achievement?

Fame, which used to be connected to honor, and bestowed by achievement, has now become so separated from either that it exists in a category of its own, frequently valueless and often unrelated to anything resembling actual accomplishment.

What role do the changes in communications technology play in the evolution of fame?

Communications technology, as it has developed in the last hundred and fifty years has conferred upon fame the comparative new element of ubiquity. Perhaps Alexander the Great was ubiquitous when his image was on the common coin of the Mediterranean for more than half a millennium. Perhaps Benjamin Franklin was ubiquitous when statues and busts of him could be bought in gift shops. But now, through the visual media, that aura of ubiquity is there to be shared by both the trivial and the profound, usually more the former than the latter. The result is a greater and greater degree of ersatz connection with those people Richard Schickel has called "intimate strangers." Illusory kinship systems fostered by the ubiquitous images of the famous erase the traditional separation between audience and performer. At the extreme of this process is the stalker, whose dreams have been invaded by those images and who therefore believes he has a right to possess them for himself.

Why do we desire to be famous? And how does that desire relate to changes in the contours of modern life?

As European and American society became less stratified in the wake of the American and French revolutions, as the propaganda of "careers open to talents" and social mobility became more pervasive, the founding myth of modern democratic society became the Cinderella story: the otherwise unknown and even despised outsider who is elevated to the highest place in the kingdom. Add to this central political and social myth a world of media in which we are constantly being shown examples of those who achieved fame, as well as a world of more and more people, many of whom are threatening faceless oth-

ers. The only escape, the sole route to regaining autonomy, power, and agency, seems to be only through a wholehearted commitment to personal fame.

Could you say more about what you call the “contract between the audience and the fame seeker”?

The essence of the contract between the performer and the audience is that the performer cannot in any way imply he did it alone. “I Did It My Way” is a song only a few can sing without vengeance being exacted. The audience demands some direct acknowledgment of their role in making the star: “I did it my way because you supported me; you are the wind beneath my wings.” Stars who get too big to grant this power to their fans may soon find themselves out of the limelight because the only thing the audience of fame likes better than venerating a star is bringing him down. Asserting a sense of personal privacy is seen as a provocation at best and hypocrisy at worst: you’ve stepped over the fame line, and your entire life is fair game.