The Accidental and the Infamous: When "Ordinary" People Become Celebrities - The Case of Timothy McVeigh

Presentation, Marita Sturken  
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Respondent, Neal Gabler  
The Norman Lear Center, USC

Meeting Notes, Johanna Blakley  
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Celebrity, Politics & Public Life  
A presentation to the Celebrity, Politics & Public Life faculty seminar

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The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

Celebrity, Politics & Public Life

Since Fall 2000, the Norman Lear Center has sponsored a popular faculty seminar series on Celebrity, Politics & Public Life. Faculty and deans from over 20 departments convene three times each semester to develop an interdisciplinary analysis of political life in this country as it is shaped by popular culture. The project is co-directed by USC History Department Chair Steven J. Ross and Leo Braudy, Leo S. Bing Professor of English. Our topics have ranged from Elian Gonzales and Timothy McVeigh to Angela Davis, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Edward G. Robinson. The group includes professors and deans from anthropology, art history, cinema-television, theatre, ethnic studies, American studies, German, sociology, business, political science, economics, education, policy and planning, philosophy, gender studies, art history, psychology, communication, journalism, English, and history.

Participants

Elinor Accampo, History
Sarah Banet-Weiser, Communication
Johanna Blakley, Norman Lear Center
Leo Braudy, English
Neal Gabler, Norman Lear Center
Eric Gordon, Cinema-TV
Christian Hite, English
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, Norman Lear Center
Randy Lake, Communication
Bryce Nelson, Communication
Greg Oguss, Cinema-TV
Dana Polan, Cinema-TV
Larry Pryor, Journalism
Steven Ross, History
George Sanchez, History
Nicolle Siele, Norman Lear Center
Marita Sturken, Communication
Nancy Troy, Art History
Peter Vorderer, Communication
Christina Wilson, History

The Executive Committee for 2001/2002

Leo Braudy, English
Selma Holo, University Galleries
Marty Kaplan, The Norman Lear Center
Nancy Lutkehaus, Anthropology
Dana Polan, Cinema/Television
Steven Ross, History
Marita Sturken, Communication
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Background and Summary
Professor Marita Sturken's paper examines the role that celebrity plays in the lives of ordinary citizens who, through circumstances of their own making or by chance, find themselves the focus of public scrutiny. There have been many "ordinary" figures who have been accorded a kind of celebrity status in the last few decades: Rodney King, Christa McAuliffe, Ryan White, Monica Lewinsky, Erin Brockovich, etc. This paper examines this aspect of celebrity in general, and then focuses on how it has played out in the context of the Oklahoma City bombing, and the subsequent celebrity status of Timothy McVeigh and the public visibility of the survivors of the bombing.

Respondent, Neal Gabler, Senior Fellow of the Norman Lear Center
Gabler suggested that the idea of "ordinary celebrities" is actually oxymoronic. Doesn’t someone have to be special in order to be a celebrity? Then again, Tom Hanks is an example of someone who’s become a celebrity precisely because he’s so ordinary. Obviously, the definition of "celebrity" is a complicated one. Gabler described McVeigh as someone who had constructed his own celebrity in a very calculating fashion. Though it was eventually not allowed to pass, McVeigh had invited Diane Sawyer, Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Barbara Walters to audition for the right to interview him live for sweeps (Barbara Walters actually auditioned). Gabler suggested that Tim McVeigh wrote a grand narrative for himself in which his death was one of the most important narrative components. Gabler argued that McVeigh conceived of his life as a movie and death as the most powerful way to end it.
In his evolving theory of celebrity, Gabler considers narrative a key component in the calculus of celebrity. The equation involves the following elements:

**NARRATIVE + PUBLICITY + FANDOM = CELEBRITY**

It is possible to have more of one or the other, but at least a little of all three are necessary for the lowest level celebrity. A worldwide superstar usually has a great deal of all three.

Gabler believes that we should make distinctions between different kinds of famous people: in Gabler’s way of thinking, McVeigh is a protagonist, not a celebrity. McVeigh is famous but he is not a celebrity because he did not have the fan-base necessary to classify as such. In fact, Gabler argued that McVeigh is so famous that we actually mistake him for a celebrity. One reason for this confusion is that the media treated him like a celebrity. The so-called “celebrity treatment” is something that has been extrapolated from the world of celebrity and applied haphazardly everywhere else.

Gabler compared a “Vanity Fair” cover with Brad Pitt to an issue of “Newsweek,” which features a soulful (and glamorous) cover photo of McVeigh. Reading excerpts from both the Pitt article and the McVeigh piece, Gabler emphasized the similarities in treatment, particularly the disproportionate importance placed on every utterance and the overall amplification of personality typical in the treatment of celebrities.

**The Discussion**

Communication Professor Sarah Banet-Weiser took issue with one of Gabler’s points, arguing that it is not at all oxymoronic that the ordinary person should become extraordinary. In fact, liberal exceptionalism is a hallmark of American identity formation. English Professor Leo Braudy pointed out that the creation of celebrities was an important method used in order to create this country and its particular “American” identity. History Professor Elinor Accampo agreed and suggested that McVeigh’s story – his celebrity and his demonization – is a very American kind of phenomenon.
Cinema-TV Professor Dana Polan agreed with Gabler about the disproportionate focus on every aspect of a celebrity’s life. In fact, he claimed you could make a distinction between a functional focus (e.g., people trying to figure out how the economy might be affected by looking at Alan Greenspan’s tie) and a nonfunctional focus (obsessing over what a star ate for dinner or the names of her pets).

Professor Sturken mentioned that she was a bit shocked to hear survivors and family of survivors of the Oklahoma City bombing refer to McVeigh by his first name: “Just when we thought we were getting somewhere, Tim goes and pulls something like this.” This resonated with University Galleries Director Selma Holo who recalled a taxi cab driver in Spain who was appalled by the way Americans were treating “Tim.” She had no idea who he was talking about at first, and she was surprised by the kind of intimacy that people were willing to express toward a confessed criminal.

Professor George Sanchez argued that this familiarity – the temptation to refer to him as “Tim” – was really about race. As a white guy, people wonder, how could he do this to his own people? How did this Middle American boy go wrong? And with his military background, he should be our hero, not our terrorist. Unlike Ted Kaczynski, the brilliant isolationist academic, “Tim” was supposed to be one of us. Professor Braudy pointed out that this Jekyll and Hyde teetering is actually a common story, and Nicolle Siele from the Norman Lear Center explained how this oscillation between good and evil makes McVeigh’s story even more compelling to us, ultimately raising his profile as a celebrity.

Gabler emphasized the way in which journalists pitched the story. Journalism has adopted the language of cinema, and in that world, the best stories need stars. The star is obviously McVeigh, and the journalistic “hook” for his story is that “Tim” could be your son.

Much of the discussion focussed on the death penalty, its role in the creation of celebrities, and the demonization of high-profile criminals like McVeigh. Norman Lear Center Director Marty Kaplan asked whether the language of cosmology and metaphysics (Good and Evil) had any place
within political discourse. Do we believe in demons? Tongue in cheek, Professor Sanchez asked whether Satan might be considered a celebrity: does he have fans? How would the media pitch his story? Sanchez described execution as the reverse of the “celebrity treatment,” in that the state struggles against the media’s attempt to personalize the criminal while the state tries to punish him.

Braudy mentioned the government’s inability to control the response of its audience when it stages public punishments. The guy in the stocks may be reviled by spectators or revered by them. Braudy also pointed to our temptation to apply one face (Tim McVeigh) to a complex situation (Oklahoma City Bombing) in order to safely place blame and remove the necessity for any complex analysis. History Professor Steven Ross was especially impressed by Sturken’s related argument about McVeigh’s demonization. By representing him as an evil figure, public discourse forecloses an analysis of his actions and their political and historical roots. The good/evil binary has frequently blocked political analysis (Ross mentioned media coverage of the Symbionese Liberation Army), and Ross regarded this as a key component for analysis in any discussion of celebrity culture.