



They Really Like Us – In Our Dreams

By Martin Kaplan

Los Angeles Times Op-Ed

June 21, 2005

USC ANNENBERG

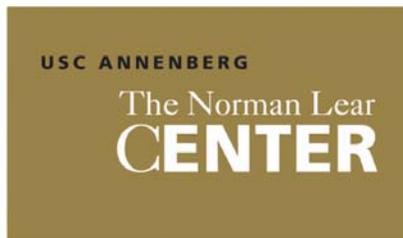
The Norman Lear

CENTERTAINMENT

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

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. For more information, please visit www.learcenter.org



Martin Kaplan

The Director of the [Lear Center](#) is Martin Kaplan, Associate Dean, [USC Annenberg School](#). A *summa cum laude* graduate of Harvard, a Marshall Scholar to Cambridge University, and a Stanford Ph.D., he has been an Aspen Institute program officer; a federal education staffer; a Vice President's chief speechwriter; a Washington journalist in print, television, and radio; a deputy Presidential campaign manager; a Disney Studios vice president of motion picture production; and a film and television writer and producer.



They Really Like Us – In Our Dreams

It was a comment by Juror No. 8 that nailed the weirdest aspect of it. "Even though he's a superstar, he's human," said Melissa Herard of Michael Jackson after his acquittal. "To me, he's just a normal person, and you could say to him, 'Hey, what's up?' It made him real in my mind."

Whoa. The notion that Michael Jackson is "just a normal person" is by itself breathtaking – but the fantasy of a casual friendship with him is stranger yet, and cuts to the core of our cult of celebrity.

These jurors are not fools. They knew about the dangled baby, the bizarre plastic surgery, the sleeping with boys, the toxic entourage, and all the other danger signs of narcissism. Nevertheless, they – like the sign-waving fans outside the Santa Maria courthouse, and like the rest of us watching on TV at home – were apparently willing to give Jackson a chance to demonstrate that he has a normal, even healthy, relationship with his own celebrity.

These days, we all think we know what's behind the image curtain. Despite the dreams of marketers and press agents, we are not merely marks for their cons, pigeons for their mesmerism, sitting ducks for their *InStyle* shoots, uncritical consumers of their confected narratives.

We know the payroll stars have to carry – not only agent, manager, lawyer and accountant, but also stylist, publicist, personal assistant, personal trainer, plus the high school friends, in-laws, scammers and suck-ups endemic to any decent-sized entourage. We know the machinery it takes to airbrush photos, approve interview bylines, plant column items, muzzle nannies, appear humble, and blame mug shots on tragic addictions. We know about the faux-romances, and why stars submit to them, and the faux social causes, and why they embrace them. We know all about the big falls, courageous rehabs, re-discovered spiritualities and staged plucky comebacks.

Yet knowing all this, we also know that stars are different from us. It is not their talent that creates that distinction, but their celebrity itself. Their famousness gives them an aura, confers a magic on them. They are not only magnets for our attention, they are magnets for our fantasies.

And of all the yearnings we project on them, the most potent is this: If they knew us, they would like us.

If we can believe that of our celebs, then we are capable of forgiving them just about anything. If we can maintain the fan's delusion that our stars would like to have a latte with us, that the only thing that's preventing us from being friends with them is access, then there is no crime we won't consider acquitting them of. That, after all, is what friends are for.

■ ■ ■
Of all the yearnings we project on them, the most potent is this: If they knew us, they would like us.
■ ■ ■

In that sense, we will all be jurors for the Phil Spector trial, just as we were all jurors for Michael Jackson, Robert Blake, Martha Stewart, Kobe Bryant, Mike Tyson, O.J. Simpson, and all the other celebs brought to the bar of justice. From now to the end-times, cable news and the rest of the degraded infotainment industry formerly known as journalism will force-feed us famous-defendant trial news like *foie gras* geese, and we will feel as though we are spending as much time hearing testimony as the empaneled dozen in the courtroom. Although we may believe we are assessing the evidence, deep down – or maybe, shallow down – we will also be deciding whether the defendant is "just a normal person," whether we could say, "Hey, what's up?" to the accused, and not get treated like an insect or a stalker.

Audiences are juries. Our entertainment-saturated society puts us in a juridical relationship with all famous people, all the time. Trials only heighten that drama. We may pride ourselves on our antennae for authenticity, believing it's possible to spot the difference between keepin' it real, and a star who's merely good at faking intimacy with us. But as Oscar Wilde said, "To be natural is such a very difficult pose to keep up."