THANKS TO THE DIGITAL DEMOCRATIZATION OF FAME, WE ARE EVEN MORE IN THE THRALL OF CELEBRITY—EXCEPT NOW WE HAVE A SHOT AT IT OURSELVES.

Mirror, Mirror On the Web

“Everyone, in the back of his mind, wants to be a star,” says YouTube co-founder Chad Hurley, explaining the dizzying success of the online mecca of amateur video in Wired magazine. And thanks to MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, LiveJournal and other bastions of the retooled Web 2.0, every Jane, Joe or Jamila can indeed be a star, be it as wannabe comics, citizen journalists, lip-syncing geeks, military bloggers, aspiring porn stars or even rodent-eating freaks.

We now live in the era of micro-celebrity, which offers endless opportunities to celebrate that most special person in your life, i.e., you—who not coincidentally is also Time magazine’s widely derided Person of the Year for 2006. An honor once reserved for world leaders, pop icons and high-profile CEOs now belongs to “you,” the ordinary netizen with the time, energy and passion to “make a movie starring my pet iguana...mash up 50 Cent’s vocals with Queen’s instrumentals...blog about my state of mind or the state of the nation or the steak-frites at the new bistro down the street.”

The editors at Time tout this “revolution” in the headiest prose: “It’s a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It’s about the cosmic compendium of knowledge Wikipedia and the million-channel people’s network YouTube and the online metropolis MySpace. It’s about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes.”

This is the stuff of progressive fantasy: change, community, collaboration. And it echoes our cherished hope that a medium by, of and for the people will create a more democratic world. So it’s easy to miss the editorial sleight of hand that slips from the “I” to the “we,” substitutes individual self-expression for collective action and conflates popular attention with social consciousness.

For all the talk about coming together, Web 2.0’s greatest successes have capitalized on our need to feel significant and admired and, above all, to be seen. The latest iteration of digital democracy has indeed brought with it a new democracy of fame, but in doing so it has left us ever more in the thrall of celebrity, except now we have a better shot at being worshiped ourselves. As MySpace luminary Christine Dolce told the New York Post, “My favorite comment is when people say that I’m their idol. That girls look up to me.”

So we upload our wackiest videos to YouTube, blog every sordid detail of our personal lives so as to insure at least fifty inbound links, add 200 new “friends” a day to our MySpace page with the help of friendflood.com, all the time hoping that one day all our efforts at self-promotion will merit—at the very least—our very own Wikipedia entry.

In The Frenzy of Renown, written in 1986, Leo Braudy documented the long and intimate relationship between mass media and fame. The more plentiful, accessible and immediate the ways of gathering and distributing information have become, he wrote, the more ways there are to be known: “In the past that medium was usually literature, theater, or public monuments. With the Renaissance came painting and engraved portraits, and the modern age has added photography, radio, movies, and television. As each new medium of fame appears, the human image it conveys is intensified and the number of
individuals celebrated expands." It's no surprise then that the Internet, which offers vastly greater immediacy and accessibility than its top-down predecessors, should further flatten the landscape of celebrity.

The democratization of fame, however, comes at a significant price. "Through the technology of image reproduction and information reproduction, our relation to the increasing number of faces we see every day becomes more and more transitory, and 'famous' seems as devalued a term as 'tragic,'" Braudy wrote. And the easier it is to become known, the less we have to do to earn that honor. In ancient Greece, when fame was inextricably linked to posterity, an Alexander had to make his mark on history to insure that his praises would be sung by generations to come. The invention of the camera in the nineteenth century introduced the modern notion of fame linked inextricably to a new type of professional: the journalist. Aspiring celebrities turned increasingly to achievements that would bring them immediate acclaim, preferably in the next day's newspaper, and with the rise of television, on the evening news.

The broadcast media's voracious appetite for spectacle insured that notoriety and fame soon became subsumed by an all-encompassing notion of celebrity, where simply being on TV became the ultimate stamp of recognition. At the same time, advertisers sought to redefine fame in terms of buying rather than doing, fusing the American Dream of material success with the public's hunger for stars in programs such as Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.

But the advent of cyber-fame is remarkable in that it is divorced from any significant achievement—farting to the tune of "Jingle Bells," for example, can get you on VH1. While a number of online celebrities are rightly known for doing something (a blogger like Markos Moulitsas, say), and still others have leveraged their virtual success to build lucrative careers (as with the punk-rock group Fall Out Boy), it is no longer necessary to do either in order to be "famous."

Fame is now reduced to its most basic ingredient: public attention. And the attention doesn't have to be positive either, as in the case of the man in Belfast who bit the head off a mouse for a YouTube video. "In our own time merely being looked at carries all the necessary ennoblement," Braudy wrote twenty years ago, words that ring truer than ever today.

Celebrity has become a commodity in itself, detached from and more valuable than wealth or achievement.

Our preoccupation with fame is at least partly explained by our immersion in a media-saturated world that constantly tells us, as Braudy described it, "we should [be famous] if we possibly can, because it is the best, perhaps the only, way to be." Less obvious, however, is how our celebrity culture has fueled, and been fueled by, a significant generational shift in levels of narcissism in the United States.

In the 1950s, only 12 percent of teenagers between 12 and 14 agreed with the statement, "I am an important person." By the late 1980s, the number had reached an astounding 80 percent, an upward trajectory that shows no sign of reversing. Preliminary findings from a joint study conducted by Jean Twenge, Keith Campbell and three other researchers, revealed that an average college student in 2006 scored higher than 65 percent of the students in 1987 on the standard Narcissism Personality Inventory test, which includes statements such as "I am a special person," "I find it easy to manipulate people" and "If I were on the Titanic, I would deserve to be on the first lifeboat." In her recent book Generation Me, Twenge applies that overarching label to everyone born between 1970 and 2000.

According to Twenge and her colleagues, the spike in narcissism is linked to an overall increase in individualism, which has been fostered by a number of factors, including greater geographical mobility, breakdown of traditional communities and more important, "the self-focus that blossomed in the 1970s (and became mundane and commonplace over the next two decades.) In schools, at home and in popular culture, children over the past thirty-odd years have been inculcated with the same set of messages: You're special; love yourself; follow your dreams; you can be anything you want to be.

These mantras, in turn, have been woven into an all-pervasive commercial narrative used to hawk everything from movie tickets to sneakers. Just do it, baby, but make sure you buy that pair of Nike's first. The idea that every self is important has been redefined to suit the needs of a cultural marketplace that devalues
the intense focus on self that is the hallmark of the post-boomer generation. "If you aren't posting, you don't exist. People say, 'I post, therefore I am,'" Rishad Tobaccowala, CEO of Denuo, a new media consultancy, told Wired, inadvertently capturing the essence of Web 2.0, which is driven by our hunger for self-expression. Blogs, amateur videos, personal profiles, even interactive features such as Amazon.com's reviews offer ways to satisfy our need to be in the public eye.

But the virtual persona we project online is a carefully edited version of ourselves, as "authentic" as a character on reality TV. People on reality TV "are ultra-self-aware versions of the ordinary, über-fascimiles of themselves in the same way that online personals are recreations of self constantly tweaked for maximum response and effect," writes Niedzviecki in his book.

Self-expression slides effortlessly into self-promotion as we shape our online selves—be it on a MySpace profile, LiveJournal blog or a YouTube video—to insure the greatest attention. Nothing beats good old-fashioned publicity even in the brave new world of digital media. So it should come as no shock that the oh-so-authentic LonelyGirl15 should turn out to be a PR stunt or that the most popular person on MySpace is the mostly naked Tila Tequila, the proud purveyor of "skankpop" who can boast of 1,626,097 friends, a clothing line, a record deal and making the cover of Maxim UK and Stuff magazines. YouTube has become the virtual equivalent of Los Angeles, the destination de rigueur for millions of celebrity aspirants, all hoping they will be the next Amanda Congdon, the videoblogger now with a gig on ABCNews.com, or the Spiridellis brothers, who landed venture capital funding because of their wildly popular video "This Land."

Beginning with the dot-com boom in the 1990s through to its present iteration as Web 2.0, the cultural power of the Internet has been fueled by the modern-day Cinderella fantasy of "making it." With their obsessive focus on A-list bloggers, upstart twentysomethings and ambassadors of weirdos and creeps, the media continually refrares the Internet as yet another shot at the glittering prize of celebrity. "We see the same slow channeling of the idea that your main goal in life is to reach as many people as possible all over the world with your product. And your product is you," says Niedzviecki. "As long as that's true, it's very hard to see how the Internet is going to change that." As long as more democratic media merely signify a greater democracy of fame—e.g., look how that indie musician landed a contract with that major label—we will remain enslaved by the same narrative of success that sustains corporate America.

In our eagerness to embrace the web as a panacea for various political ills, progressives often forget that the Internet is merely a medium like any other, and the social impact of its various features—interactivity, real-time publishing, easy access, cheap mass distribution—will be determined by the people who use them. There is no doubt that these technologies have facilitated greater activism, and new forms of it, both on- and offline. But
we confuse the web’s promise of increased visibility with real change. Political actions often enter the ether of the media world only to be incorporated into narratives of individual achievement. And the more successful among us end up as bold-faced names, leached dry of the ideas and values they represent—yet another face in the cluttered landscape of celebrity, with fortunes that follow the usual trajectory of media attention: First you’re hot, and then you’re not.

But it’s all about you. Me. And all the various forms of the First Person Singular,” writes cranky media veteran Brian Williams in his contribution to Time’s year-end package. “Americans have decided the most important person in their lives is...them, and our culture is now built upon that idea.” So, have we turned into a nation of egoists, uninterested in anything that falls outside our narrow frame of self-reference?

As Jean Twenge points out, individualism doesn’t necessarily preclude a social conscience or desire to do good. “But [Generation Me] articulates it as I want to make a difference,” she says. “The outcome is still good, but it does put the self in the center.”

Stephen Duncombe, on the other hand, author of the new book Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy, argues that rather than dismiss your yearning for individual recognition, progressives need to create real-world alternatives that offer such validation. For example, in place of vast anonymous rallies that aim to declare strength in numbers, he suggests that liberal activism should be built around small groups. “The size of these groups is critical. They are intimate affairs, small enough for each participant to have an active role in shaping the group’s direction and voice,” he writes. “In these ‘affinity groups,’ as they are called, every person is recognized: in short, they exist.”

Such efforts, however, would have to contend with GenMe’s aversion to collective action. “The baby boomers were self-focused in a different way. Whether it was self-examination like EST or social protest, they did everything in groups. This new generation is allergic to groups,” Twenge says. And as Duncombe admits, activism is a tough sell for a nation weaned on the I-driven fantasy of celebrity that serves as “an escape from democracy with its attendant demands for responsibility and participation.”

There is a happier alternative. If these corporate technologies of self-promotion work as well as promised, they may finally render fame meaningless. If everyone is onstage, there will be no one left in the audience. And maybe then we rock stars can finally turn our attention to life down here on earth. Or it may be life on earth that finally jolts us out of our admiring reverie in the mirrored hall of fame. We forget that this growing self-involvement is a luxury afforded to a generation that has not experienced a wide-scale war or economic depression. If and when the good times come to an end, so may our obsession with fame. “There are a lot of things on the horizon that could shake us out of the way we are now. And some of them are pretty ugly,” Niedzvicki says. “You won’t be able to say that my MySpace page is more important than my real life. When you’re a corpse, it doesn’t matter how many virtual friends you have.” Think global war, widespread unemployment, climate change. But then again, how cool would it be to log your life in the new Ice Age—kind of like starring in your very own Day After Tomorrow, LOL.

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previous attempts at peace have failed (news to no one) and the colonization of the West Bank is irreversible: Settlements are “an irreversible reality.” As he states in his book: “Palestinians do not have the political or material strengths to stop the settlements and walls that have rendered a two-state solution unworkable” and “there seems to be no constellation of internal or external forces that will push Israel out of the West Bank against its will.” So Abunimah concludes from this that Palestinians should abandon their struggle for national self-determination and construct a “moral” struggle for “individual rights” and democracy within a binational state. For “diaspora Palestinians” like himself, he argues, they exist as a “nexus” of individuals who are “long accustomed to transience and movement, nationalism has lost its luster.” If only the Palestinians could now be as inclusive as the ANC, Abunimah wishes: “build a consensus around a clear, simple, and inclusive alternative like the Freedom Charter” and “Israel’s arguments are powerless in a struggle that is not about winning territory but securing democratic rights for all.”

Such naive moralizing misses the point I emphasized in my review: What was possible in South Africa has proven to be far less possible in Israel-Palestine. The reason is not Palestinian nationalism, as Abunimah charges, but the nature of Zionism itself. Unlike South African apartheid, Zionism is an exclusionary settler colonialism and has sought to dispense with rather than exploit the indigenous population.

As Mona Younis argues: “While the majority of both whites and Jews were committed to exclusionary states in South Africa and Israel...the economic inclusion of Africans in South Africa permitted an inclusionary vision that had the potential of gaining support from significant sections of whites. Palestinian exclusion obliterated this possibility in Israel.”

How can Abunimah expect bantustanized Palestinians to produce the same outcome of a one-state democracy in a situation where they are banished and cut off from their oppressors’ structures? Where are Palestine’s townships and labor movements, and where is Israel’s Joe Slovo and his ANC-allied Communist Party, which had the support of a sizable and influential minority of whites?

This is why I felt it would have been worthwhile for Abunimah to consider the history of binationalism in Israel-Palestine more closely. It may have helped determine why binationalism has been such a weak and marginal option and explain why it has had such little support among Palestinians and none among Israelis.

But Abunimah cares little about popular opinion. He is unrealistic in proposing a solution that has zero support among Israelis rather than advocating a solution that has their majority support (negotiated peace) or at least their 34 percent support (withdrawal to 1967 lines) and is backed by an international consensus. If Abunimah has spent a lot of time objecting to the feasibility of the two-state solution, he spends far too little time appreciating why after forty years of Israeli colonization, rejectionism and demonization of Palestinians still remains such solid support in Israel for ending the occupation. Any real advocacy would choose to work with a realistic political program as an initial step in resolving the conflict rather than with wishful thinking.

BASIR ABU-MANneh

JUST ONE QUESTION

Champaign, Ill.

Regarding John Leonard’s 3,360-word review of Thomas Pynchon’s 1,085-page book “Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind,” Dec. 11: Yeah, but is it any good?

STEVE MCGAUGHEY