

DUBLIN BUSINESS SCHOOL

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**THE REPRESENTATION OF CONTEMPORARY CELEBRITY CULTURE IN
RICKY GERVAIS' AND STEPHEN MERCHANT'S *THE OFFICE* AND *EXTRAS***

**THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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ABSTRACT

The objective of this research is to examine how developments in contemporary celebrity culture are represented in two situation comedies written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, *The Office* (2001-2003) and *Extras* (2005-2007). My aim is to prove how alterations to the traditional sitcom format, as made by Gervais and Merchant, have succeeded in transforming the sitcom from a benign entertainment driven format to socially engaged programming. I wish to prove that these alterations, which coincide with developments in contemporary celebrity culture, allow for a sustained critique of the behaviour and attitudes of both audiences towards those in the public eye, and the celebrities themselves in their quest for audience approval.

The aim of Chapter One will be to assess the relationship between celebrities and consumers in the new celebrity culture of democratisation, to examine the effects this democratisation has on media audiences, ordinary people seeking fame, and existing celebrities who must change their relationship with the media in order to retain their merit-based fame. It will assess the moral and ethical concerns associated with ordinary people appearing on television, and explore public opinion as to how those appearing in the public eye should be treated.

In Chapter Two, the evolution of the sitcom from passive, commercially driven entertainment genre to searching socially engaged programming will be explored. Chapters Three and Four will assess how Gervais and Merchant address all of the above issues in both sitcoms, and prove whether or not their characters have anything to say to voyeuristic audiences about their attitude towards those appearing in the public eye, to those members of the public who seek fame, and to those existing celebrities who court

the media in order to retain their fame. An analysis of *The Office* will be conducted in Chapter Three and will centre around the ordinary individual who seeks fame on foot of the workplace docusoap in which he is participating, while Chapter Four will analyse *Extras* from the perspective of the existing celebrity who must compromise himself in order to retain his existing fame.

This research will centre around theories of contemporary celebrity culture and fame, together with those concerning recent developments in sitcom. It will draw upon journal articles with a view to assessing critical opinion of the moral and ethical issues concerned with reality television, and entertainment driven fly-on-the-wall documentaries such as the docusoap, and will make reference to a survey undertaken by the Broadcasting Standards Commission which reflects contemporary attitudes to broadcasting regulation, exploring in particular public opinion regarding celebrities and those appearing in fly-on-the-wall documentaries.

The conclusions that I wish to draw from this research are that through both sitcoms, the viewer is directly addressed concerning their insatiable appetite for voyeurism, their belief that those in the public eye deserve to be exploited, and their refusal to accept culpability for any fame damage occurring. Because of the fact that both *The Office* and *Extras* are fictional narratives in the sitcom genre, they have the ability to foster emotional engagement in the viewer that has the power to invoke guilt and viewer culpability for the position these characters place themselves in. The audience is forced to re-examine their attitudes and behaviour, and the fame hungry individual is taught that happiness can only be found through rejecting the world of the image, and opting instead

for real, organic and loving relationships which offer the fulfilment that eradicates their monstrous characteristics and reveals the real, decent human beings that lie beneath.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-nineties, there have been marked developments in contemporary celebrity culture that have impacted on the daily lives and experiences of a great many people, influencing their attitudes, behaviour and ambitions. Docusoaps and reality television shows have rendered 'ordinary' people as the stars of the show, and it is often the case that there is little, if any, talent associated with their ascendancy to stardom. Audiences are complicit in bestowing celebrity status upon those famous for merely appearing on camera or in magazines, and it follows that this new culture of the democratisation of celebrity has altered significantly the morals, behaviours and attitudes of its consumers. Rather than being satisfied with admiring or idolising from afar, fame has become their obsession, and often their driving ambition, as they not only soak up images of others who have succeeded in crossing the divide from obscurity to ubiquity, but believe that they too are deserving of it and, more worryingly, that they can achieve it. The manner in which they respond to those in the public eye has also altered. The details of private lives are of increasing importance and have, by necessity, become one with the public persona in order to satiate the desires of a voyeur hungry public and to guarantee the star their continued celebrity status. This applies to both the new generation of celebrities who have achieved fame for having merely appeared in the media, and those for which fame came as a result of, sacrifice, hard work and talent.

At the same time as these alterations to the relationship between celebrity and consumer were occurring, the television fiction genre of situation comedy had also begun to undergo important changes. Often perceived as a rigid format whose only function was to afford pleasure through making the viewer laugh, from the mid-nineties onwards, the

genre showed evidence of having begun to abandon the stereotypes often associated with it, and to make changes to its most well-known stylistic features, including, for example, its laughter track and shooting style. Further, it began to borrow from other televisual genres and formats to convey its narratives. Most notable, however, was that the new style sitcom was becoming more socially engaged. Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, writers and directors of *The Office* (2001-2003) and *Extras* (2005-2007), have produced two groundbreaking sitcoms which exhibit new and innovative styles reflecting the changes mentioned here, and I intend to focus my analysis on both of these sitcoms throughout this dissertation.

I will assess the phenomenon that is contemporary celebrity culture together with changes to the sitcom with a view to proving that the latter's transition from benign entertainment format to socially engaged programming provides us with, in the case of *The Office* and *Extras*, a much needed platform for a sustained critique of the media and society where our relationship with celebrity culture is concerned. Across its trajectory, I will assess why the ordinary person has been catapulted to fame, and why they would desire to be, with particular reference to David Brent, *The Office*'s 'boss from hell', who is an archetypal example of a docusoap 'star' who seizes his opportunity for his fifteen minutes of fame on foot of his new found exposure.

I will then turn my attention to the existing celebrity who must alter their relationship with the media, even if it results in degradation or humiliation, in order to retain their celebrity status. My main focus here will be on the fictional character of Andy Millman, *Extras*' main protagonist, who demonstrates the lengths a celebrity is willing to go through to hold on to what they have, but I will also analyse the functions of the

peripheral characters who have had negative first hand experiences of contemporary celebrity culture.

I will demonstrate that the obsession with fame that consumes these characters, existing, as they do, at each end of the spectrum of contemporary celebrity culture, is a product of the world we live in, and that both star and consumer must accept culpability for the resulting monstrous behaviour. I will assess public attitudes towards those who court the media with a view to understanding the nature of people's responses to those in the public eye, and to prove just how incisive both *The Office* and *Extras* are when it comes to critiquing public attitudes and behaviour. I will prove that the unique emotional engagement fostered by the new style sitcom format effectively admonishes the spectator for their behaviour and attitudes which are often merciless, dehumanised, cruel and void of feeling, and teaches them that in the postmodern world of the hyperreal and the image, true happiness and well-being can only be found in rejecting this world for the fulfilment found in real, loving and organic relationships.

CHAPTER ONE

Socrates said fame was the perfume of heroic deeds. Well it probably was back then. You had to do something. That was before *Heat* and *Big Brother*.

- Ricky Gervais, *The Times*, 22 March 2007.

In 1998, the BBC broadcast two factual entertainment shows, *The Cruise* (1998), which attracted 11 million viewers per episode, and *Driving School* (1997-2003) to which 12.5 million viewers tuned in at its peak¹. These shows did not take the form of traditional observational documentaries, but privileged entertainment over realism, frivolity over seriousness, and caricature over the naturalistic portrayal of real people. They celebrated eccentricity and performativity, and were edited in a manner not dissimilar from the soap opera. The melding of fictional style with factual raw material, "... the virtues of drama with the pseudo-realism of real-life ...",² lead to the coining of the word docusoap to describe these shows and the many others like them which dominated the schedules from the mid to late nineties and beyond.

While the viewing figures clearly demonstrate their popularity with audiences, critics were far from enamoured with the format. Firstly, they were critical of a new hunger in the viewer for a voyeurism which tempered their better judgement and lead to the perception of victims as spectacles more deserving of laughter than pity or sympathy. "‘Victims’ were presented to viewers not as sad, but as quirky. Instead of lengthy earnest

¹ Stella Bruzzi, "Docusoaps", in Glen Creeber, Toby Miller and John Tulloch [Eds], *The Television Genre Book: 2nd Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 138.

² Ray Cathode, "Voyeurs From Hell", *Sight and Sound* (February 1998), 35.

interviews, their statements were cut down to easy-to-digest soundbites.”³ Further, failure and disaster had become sources of entertainment, which is potentially damaging to both the subject and the viewer.

Secondly, the program makers were accused of viewing human inadequacies as an infinite resource to be filmed and edited on their terms without any regard for the mental or emotional state of the subject, and were levelled with the charge of exploitation for the purposes of filling screen time. One writer, Andy Hamilton, is severely critical in this regard, citing the slogan on American talk show host Jerry Springer’s wall, “No subject too indecent, no individual too pathetic”,⁴ as reflective of this new kind of amoral exploitation of participants by producers of such shows. He views the voyeurism of the audiences that enjoy them as resembling “... a visit to the zoo”⁵ and describes the daytime talk show in particular as “... the genre that I think can least be trusted with real life. It treats people as human plasticine, malleable and disposable”.⁶ This mode of viewing and treatment of program participants is also typical of the docusoap. Hamilton describes how docusoaps

... focus on ordinary people but they like their ordinary people to be colourful and, as we’ve seen, the line between colourful and disturbed is not always easy to pick.... The worst ones aim to give the audience its jollies in cheap thrills and regard the ordinary people they briefly focus on purely as high yield, low-cost minutage.⁷

³ Victoria Mapplebeck, “The Mad, the Bad and the Sad”, *DOX: Documentary Film Quarterly* no. 16 (April 1998), 8.

⁴ Andy Hamilton, “Brain Surgeons from Hell”, *Television: The Journal of the Royal Television Society* no. 35 vol. 7 (October 1998), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

Thirdly, the complicit subjects who participated were criticised for their unbridled hunger for fame off the back of an albeit brief performance on one of these shows. As Ray Cathode observes, most of them “... seem more likely to use their six weeks of fame as the foundation for a career opening supermarkets than as the basis for a complaint ...”⁸ concerning their representation on screen.

Finally, critics felt that docusoaps had nothing to say about modern life because of the foregrounding of performativity and frivolity. They criticised them for their failure to challenge the viewer to re-assess their attitudes in any way,⁹ for illustrating the tragic rather than exploring it,¹⁰ for feeding off life instead of observing it,¹¹ and for failing to demonstrate any respect for the reality of other people’s lives.¹²

Andy Hamilton voices his concern that, “As commercial pressures drive broadcasters towards ordinary people as a low cost on-screen resource, can we trust tv not to reshape life for its own ends?”¹³ To take this concern further, if producers have the power to shape real life for the purposes of entertainment, the resulting victim voyeurism and the perception of the sad and pathetic as sources of hilarity, surely indicates that they have also succeeded in altering our real life responses, behaviours and attitudes towards our fellow human beings, and not for the better.

This analysis of the docusoap gives rise to many questions which need to be answered. Why do the public find such enjoyment in viewing the ordinary person go about their daily lives on screen? How does this influence their relationship with celebrity culture

⁸ Cathode, “Voyeurs From Hell”, 35.

⁹ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰ Mapplebeck, “The Mad, the Bad and the Sad”, 9.

¹¹ Hamilton, “Brain Surgeons From Hell”, 12.

¹² Ibid., 12.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

generally? Why are the participants so desperate to grasp their shot at fame at the risk of compromising their dignity? In order to answer these questions, and to understand this new relationship between viewer and subject, it is necessary to assess the recent changes that have occurred in celebrity culture.

Ellis Cashmore finds the roots of contemporary celebrity culture within developments in media occurring in the 1980s and 1990s, specifically with regard to the deregulation and privatisation of television stations and the advent of satellite television. With so many stations and so much airtime to fill, “ ... there was bound to be an overflow of entertainers, most of whom would make little impression on the public consciousness.”¹⁴

The effects of this played a major part in laying the foundations for the democratisation of contemporary celebrity culture. Exposure and visibility had become essential to remaining in the public consciousness, but over time, this became more important than the reason for the individual’s exposure in the first place, and talent became less important than the achievement of merely being seen. As Cashmore explains, “The most important feature of the coming age was visibility: doing was less important than just being in the public gaze ... ”.¹⁵

It was as a result of this shift in traditional perceptions of celebrity, the privileging of visibility over talent, that

... our concept of merit changed. Figures who traditionally earned distinction and drew praise for their efforts vied with characters whose achievements were often uncertain. Literally worthless individuals, it seemed, began cropping up. What’s more, they commanded interest for nothing in particular.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 10.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

Another consequence of the necessity to fill airtime was the privileging of entertainment programs over more serious programming. This is problematic, as “... for the most part, entertainment doesn’t prompt us to modify ourselves in any substantive way. Light entertainment, to use a more indicative term, became a staple of a formula that demanded only a modest level of attention from viewers.”¹⁷ It is clear to see, therefore, how being in the gaze of others could become the defining characteristic of modern day celebrity, how entertainment shows facilitated this, how talent as a prerequisite to fame could become less important than merely being famous on foot of one’s visibility, and how the combination of these three developments could give rise to programs like the docusoap. However, it is necessary to analyse further the role played by the media in developments in contemporary celebrity culture in order to understand why the ordinary person in particular would become the mainstay of televisual entertainment and celebrity culture from the mid-nineties onwards, and why fame became such an integral part of every day life for those consumed by its images. The continuity of the role of the media can be seen as “... something qualitatively distinctive and exceptional about contemporary celebrity culture ...”.¹⁸ Cashmore cites Jessica Evans who uses the term ‘mediated persona’ to describe how utterly and absolutely dependent the contemporary celebrity is on the media for the creation and dissemination of their image to mass audiences.¹⁹ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn claim, “Whoever desires to be prominent or notable requires the mass

¹⁷ Ibid., 9-10.

¹⁸ Ibid., 260.

¹⁹ Jessica Evans, “Celebrity, Media and History”, in Jessica Evans and Desmond Hesmondhalgh [Eds], *Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity* (England: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 11-56, quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 257.

visibility of media recognition, albeit for a moment.”²⁰ In line with alterations to the public perception of merit, Cashmore supports David Giles’ theory that

‘Celebrity is essentially a media production, rather than the worthy recognition of greatness’ ... and hype [*is*] its ‘purest form.’ Hype had no object of any value: it just implies ‘that a phenomenon can be made to appear valuable, even when its value is non-existent’.²¹

The media, therefore, has the power to bestow fame, celebrity, social distinction and success upon an individual, regardless of whether or not they have done anything to earn it, and the consumer is complicit in their support of this. These gifts, however, are being increasingly bestowed upon the ordinary person, and it is necessary to understand why this is the case.

Su Holmes and Sean Redmond claim,

... the media constructs and maintains a symbolic hierarchy between media/ordinary worlds, in which the media is presented as the privileged “frame” through which we access the reality that matters to us as social beings.... the mediated space is constructed as ‘special’ and significant, and to enter it, or even briefly pass through it, is to receive a form of symbolic capital.²²

They explain how “Adulation, identification and emulation are key motifs in the study of celebrity culture. The *desire* for fame, stardom or celebrification stems from the *need* to be wanted in a society where being famous appears to offer enormous material, economic social and psychic rewards.”²³

²⁰ Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation* (Great Britain: Wallflower Press, 2005), 101.

²¹ David Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity* (Great Britain: MacMillan Press Ltd., 2000), quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 258-259.

²² Su Holmes and Sean Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 10.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2.

In a specifically British context, Biressi and Nunn examine contemporary celebrity culture in the context of the change in political power which took place in 1997. They explain how,

... arts and entertainment celebrities gained prominence as exemplars of a new meritocratic and essentially *modern* democratic social realm.... it was those who had succeeded in entertainment, rather than say industry or finance, who were often held up as exemplary figures 'close to' New Labour.²⁴

With the media world viewed as more important and valuable than the ordinary world, together with the fact that even those who had gained political power also appeared to privilege entertainment and celebrity above more ordinary occupations, it is easy to see why the ordinary individual would have the desire to become part of it. Further, failing to do so indicates that one's life is somehow without value. In order to 'be somebody', one must be regarded by the media as worthy of its attention. The alternative is an unremarkable life of anonymity, and thus failure. This certainly explains the increasing number of television programs which focus on ordinary individuals. Further, they are prepared to degrade, humiliate or embarrass themselves purely in the name of winning media attention by positing themselves at its centre.

Some theorists are of the opinion that the level of media worship practiced by celebrity consumers and willing participants leads to a situation whereby what takes place on screen, or in the media, is somehow more authentic than real life itself. Ben Thompson asks, "By what quirk of evolutionary development has humanity reached a point ... where situations in which a camera isn't present can seem 'less real' than those in which

²⁴ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 144.

one is?”²⁵ This can be attributed to the nature of postmodern, late capitalist society where “Real life appears devoid of substance ... ”.²⁶ Both celebrities and consumers view new media as “ ... an escape from mundane reality into a new simulated reality.”²⁷ It is because of this that the very essence of one’s identity is perceived in terms of their relationship with the media, as “ ... our current fascination with image-mediated reality indicates a desire for the eye of the camera to verify and validate one’s existence ... ”.²⁸ This explains the self-reflexive and narcissistic nature of contemporary celebrity culture, of which reality television is the strongest proof.

... this yearning to speak oneself to camera suggests a desire for the mark of authenticity, for the social legitimisation of one’s existence. In this sense the process of revelation is partly shaped by a self-conscious absorption in the emotions, desires, needs, pains and memories that the contemporary individual, attuned to a popularised psychoanalytic discourse, uses to understand his or her location in the world.²⁹

Holmes and Redmond support the notion that this is strongly linked to the nature of contemporary lived experience. They describe how “ ... ‘me, me, me’ fame ... relates to ... the egotistical, fractured, or incomplete nature of (post)modern identity... the modern self is overly vain, narcissistic and increasingly founded on possessive qualities.”³⁰ However, “On the other hand, the modern self is said to be marked by a great deal of

²⁵ Ben Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office: Revised Edition* (London: Harper Perennial), 388.

²⁶ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 96.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

³⁰ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 2.

anxiety, doubt and confusion over who- and how-to-be in a world where identity is felt to be more malleable, more questionable, and much more decidedly manufactured.”³¹

If the real world has no substance, and if one’s self and identity can only be validated via connections with the media, it is easy to see why people would turn to it for all that it can promise in terms of belonging and assurance together with the many rewards discussed earlier in this chapter.

If the media is the privileged centre through which the celebrity consumer locates the reality of their existence, then it follows that “Being ordinary, authentic or ‘real’ is a dominant rhetorical device of fame that has increasingly found its logical point of reference in the onscreen and online antics of extraordinary and ordinary people supposedly *just* being themselves.”³² As a result, “ ... the media image becomes both the de-realisation of reality and ... the source for unhindered observation and detailed monitoring of real people like ourselves.”³³

This detailed monitoring and privileging of the ordinary naturally involves the dissipation of the boundaries between public and private life.

It is precisely the mediated status of stars and celebrities, and the highly performative context in which they appear, that activates [*a*] contradictory dynamic, fostering questions such as: Is there a distinction between our ‘private’ and ‘public’ selves? Do we have any unique, essential, ‘inner self’, or are we simply a site of self-performance and public presentation?³⁴

Those that have managed to capture the attention of the media must reveal more of their private lives to arrest the attention of a voyeur hungry public for whom no detail can be

³¹ Ibid., 2.

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 100.

³⁴ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 9.

spared. Holmes and Redmond consider “ ... how the famous are constructed for public consumption (the boisterously democratic attempt to capture them looking the worse for wear, the desire to ‘starve’ them in reality shows, and the move to invade every waking minute of their lives) ... ”.³⁵ If the contemporary celebrity is perceived as such, this explains the voyeur hungry nature of the relationship between viewer and subject. The more that is revealed, it seems, the more the public desires to see, and the subject appearing in the gaze of the public eye must expose more and more in their pursuit of continued fame. In this way, the public can perceive the celebrity as being just like them rather than an idol to be admired from afar. This empowers the audience to believe that they too can succeed in winning media attention, though as Holmes and Redmond observe, citing Nick Stevenson, “ ... we need to be clear that most of the audience are still *unlikely to become* either stars or celebrities.”³⁶ Two things then are central to the appeal of television shows like the docusoap or reality television format, “ ... a *new realism*.... must attract viewers through processes of both identification and voyeurism.”³⁷

As discussed, critical opinion regarding the docusoap raises issues of moral and ethical responsibility regarding the filming of ordinary people and their representation on screen as they go about their daily lives. There is certainly a tragic element to the fact that people are so anxious and uncertain of their identity that only the camera’s gaze appears able to provide the acceptance and self-validation they crave, and that they believe their

³⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁶ Nick Stevenson, “Audiences and Celebrity”, in Jessica Evans and Desmond Hesmondhalgh [Eds], *Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity* (England: Open University Press/McGraw-Hill Education, 2005), 135-172, quoted in Su Holmes and Sean Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 14.

³⁷ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 102.

ordinary world offers them little compared to the privileged media world with its many rewards, not least its ability to affirm their existence. If increased self-reflexivity results in narcissism and egotism, and is cited as an explanation as to why ordinary persons are appearing on screen, then it also exists in those that consume these people's images, and must surely have an impact on their responses to contemporary celebrities. Further, the exposure of the personal and private, while contributing to the democratisation of celebrity generally, has the power to fan the fires of voyeurism and to alter the manner in which we behave towards our fellow human beings.

Having explored both the reasons why ordinary people have become a central feature of contemporary celebrity culture, and why people find such enjoyment in watching them, it is necessary to examine public attitudes towards both them and contemporary celebrities generally to provide evidence of how the nature of contemporary celebrity culture and the public's relationship with the media have altered their responses to those in the public eye.

In 2002, the popular talent contest *American Idol* (2002-) came with a warning for those who were considering putting themselves forward to audition which alerted them to the fact that their appearance on television may be “ ... disparaging, defamatory, embarrassing or of an otherwise unfavourable nature which may expose you to public ridicule, humiliation or condemnation.”³⁸ This did not deter thousands of auditionees from putting themselves forward for a shot at fame, nor have they ceased doing so, as the show airs to this day and draws millions of global viewers on an annual basis. What is interesting about this warning is that it implies a passive acceptance of the cruel and

³⁸ Ibid., 148.

judgemental nature of the reality show audience. It is a revealing commentary on the fame hungry nature of contemporary existence, together with the nature of reality television viewership. It proves that “There is a 24-hour, global clock of fame with someone – potentially anyone – constantly being brought out onto the mediated world stage for hailing, adoring or despising.”³⁹ Citing Graeme Turner, Ellis Cashmore explains how “Audiences place individual celebrities somewhere along a continuum that ranges from seeing them as objects of desire or emulation to regarding them as spectacular freaks worthy of derision.”⁴⁰ This serves as evidence of a desensitised audience awash in a sea of anonymous wannabes who offer themselves up for their approval or ridicule. The audience becomes as powerful as the media where reality television shows are concerned because of the power they have to make or break people desperate for fame. Through the medium of television, ordinary people can become stars, or seal their fate as failures depending on how they are perceived by a judgemental audience. This empowering of the audience contributes even further to the cynical, sneering and mocking nature of the relationship between celebrity consumers and their subjects.

Viewing in this mode also results in another development. “Reality television tended to turn its characters’ vices into virtues, so that people who displayed ignorance, dishonesty, or some kind of depravity became praiseworthy.”⁴¹ In 2006, despite singer Pete Burns’ venomous insults and unprovoked verbal attacks on his fellow housemates, viewers of the fourth series of Channel Four’s reality television contest, *Celebrity Big Brother* (2001-2002, 2005-2007, 2009-2010), voted him into the final of the show, irrespective of

³⁹ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 36.

⁴⁰ Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: Sage, 2004), quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 196.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 189.

the fact that his behaviour had reduced other participants to tears, as it was an immense source of entertainment for them. Evidence of this can also be found in the popularity of Simon Cowell, head judge and driving force behind talent show, *X-Factor* (2004-). While not a contestant, he is the central figure with the power to determine the fate of those who audition. His patronising, thoughtless and cruel comments together with his arrogance and general disdain are major sources of entertainment for the program's millions of viewers, regardless of, and sometimes even as a direct result of, their impact on the human beings he vilifies. If these are the qualities favoured by audiences, it follows that their engagement with docusoap or reality television participants is not characterised by sentimentality, compassion or empathy. Rather than asking themselves why one would want to put themselves forward for ridicule, or pitying the reality show participant for feeling that fame is the only thing that could qualify their existence, they deride and mock them for their ambition, and take pleasure in “ ... unmasking someone's hubris.”⁴² The audience is therefore not encouraged to engage in the drama but to view it as entertainment provided solely for their amusement.

Contemporary culture “ ... privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational over the enduring, the written, and the rational”,⁴³ and its consumers, easily bored, demand to be entertained by the miseries, failures, confessions and private lives of the colourful characters that populate the narratives of docusoaps and other reality show formats. The media is responsible for encouraging this type of response to celebrities or those desperate to become like them.

⁴² Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 152.

⁴³ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 6.

Newspapers, magazines, and a whole range of official and unofficial web-based media sites fill their pages with stories and pictures that lionize, idolize, ironize and (increasingly) defame and decry those who they put in the public eye. In fact, the ‘downmarket’ reporting of the famous is often about bringing [*them*] back down to earth with an almighty ‘bang’, as a sort of just desserts or social levelling for their showy affluence and/or ‘lack of talent’ in the first place.⁴⁴

Ellis Cashmore describes the viewer as a “ ... guilt-free peeping tom ... ”⁴⁵ and mourns the loss of

... moral neutrality: before reality tv, programs would have fought shy of leaving viewers without some redeeming memorandum about why they should feel ashamed of laughing at the spectacle of others’ mortification or at their indiscretions, or even at their manifest lack of talent. Reality TV ... absolved viewers from any culpability they might have felt ...⁴⁶

Hard evidence of public opinion regarding those appearing in fly-on-the-wall documentaries, celebrities, and those appearing in the public eye generally, can be found in the Broadcasting Standards Commission’s Research Working Paper, *Reflecting Community Values: Public Attitudes to Broadcasting Regulation*, published in 2001. The aim of the survey was,

... to examine all areas of the Commission’s remit in terms of public attitudes towards the regulation of the portrayal of sex and violence, the use of swearing and offensive language, and the issues of fairness and privacy; to understand the ways in which different groups of viewers and listeners, within any audience, consider these issues and the core values they wish to be respected (if any).⁴⁷

A national sample of 2008 British citizens were interviewed, and were representative of both North and South, urban and rural, progressive and traditional, young and old to give

⁴⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁴⁵ Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 190.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁷ Stefaan G. Verhulst, *Reflecting Community Values: Public Attitudes to Broadcasting Regulation* (London: Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2001), 3.

balance to the survey.⁴⁸ The responses with regard to privacy and respect in the context of this study of contemporary celebrity culture are revealing. The discussion focussed on celebrities, politicians, criminals and participants in fly-on-the-wall documentaries. Where celebrities were concerned, “It was thought by the respondents that celebrities had forfeited their right to privacy by choosing to live in the public arena.”⁴⁹ This lack of respect can be seen in the aforementioned attitudes towards those in the public eye, and is actually verbalised here by real audience representatives. One respondent stated, “If people seek publicity they should take the good with the bad”,⁵⁰ while another was of the belief that “... people in the limelight should expect to be exposed and exploited.”⁵¹ It is interesting to note that “This applied to all aspects of their lives, not only the parts that they chose to make public.”⁵² This certainly supports the notion that the democratisation and ubiquity of contemporary celebrity culture, together with the privileging of entertainment, has led to a dehumanised and desensitised mode of viewing that prevents any meaningful engagement with contemporary social experience, and divests television of its powerful capacity to provide it, denying the potential for viewers to assess and re-examine their attitudes.

Fly-on-the-wall documentaries are of particular interest in the context of this research as they concern ordinary people being filmed for docusoaps or appearing on reality television shows. The outcome of the survey revealed that, “If members of the general public agree to be followed around by cameras, they are thought to have no right to

⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁵¹ Ibid., 12.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

privacy at all.”⁵³ This being the case, it is unlikely that they are going to receive any audience empathy or sympathy in the event of inevitable failure or disaster, often the central narrative of these shows. One interviewee states, “It’s entertainment, they have made the choice.”⁵⁴ Those surveyed “ ... expressed little, if any, concern for the rights to privacy of members of the public who volunteered to appear on television. If anything, they were derided for seeking publicity and it was argued that they ... had forfeited their rights to privacy.”⁵⁵

It is clear from both critical and public perceptions of and responses to the democratisation of celebrity culture, that there exists a great need to hold a mirror up to society that shows the negative nature of responses to human beings who have placed themselves in the public eye. If entertainment does not inspire audiences to acknowledge or modify their behaviour in any way, and further, it would appear, masks their capacity to realise the cruel and judgemental nature of their responses, this research will demonstrate that it was in the area of contemporary situation comedy that this was made possible.

⁵³ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 13.

CHAPTER TWO

Laughter may be considered one of the most extravagant physical effects one person can have on another without touching them.

- Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*.

The situation comedy, or sitcom as it is more frequently described, “ ... is one of the staples of mature broadcast television.”⁵⁶ It is an extremely popular genre, and what is remarkable about it, is the fact that it has changed little in its fifty or so years of entertaining audiences.

The conventional model was that each week the established situation would be revisited, a threat to that situation would arise, usually of a comic nature, then be overcome and the status quo reinstated.... no one learned from the experience and no one escaped.... [and] viewers could relate to the never-changing environment.⁵⁷

Sitcoms were generally studio recorded in a three-wall stage set, with heightened performances, a laughter track and/or in the presence of a studio audience. Jane Feuer argues,

... if we look at the sitcom in terms of what might be called its plot, we find little development or innovation. The situation has always been a simple and repeatable frame on which to hang all manner of gags, one-liners, warm moments, physical comedy and ideological conflicts.⁵⁸

This rigidity and stability in both content and style, sees “ ... the genre criticized for its simplistic use of stereotypes, outmoded representations and an apparent failure to engage

⁵⁶ John Hartley, “Situation Comedy, Part 1”, in Glen Creeber, Toby Miller and John Tulloch [Eds], *The Television Genre Book: 2nd Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 78.

⁵⁷ Phil Wickham, *Understanding Television Texts* (London: British Film Institute, 2007), 115.

⁵⁸ Jane Feuer, “Situation Comedy, Part 2”, in Glen Creeber, Toby Miller and John Tulloch [Eds], *The Television Genre Book: 2nd Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 83.

with social or political developments.”⁵⁹ If, as Jane Feuer states, ideological conflicts form part of the static frame of the format, Brett Mills accuses the genre of “... failing to place its representations – whether progressive or not – within a larger social context, and for representing class, race or gender conflict as nothing more than personal squabbles and ignoring broader aspects of ideology.”⁶⁰

John Hartley explains how the stability of the sitcom form, together with its suitability for simple studio sets, suited the industrial nature of both British and American television production.

... it could be written and produced by an in-house team of screenwriters and production staff in industrial quantities at so many pages a day. It was also tolerant of commercial imperatives, allowing for segment-length acts, interrupted by commercial breaks, fitting into the TV hour ... or half hour.⁶¹

This commercial and industrial mode of production has had serious implications for the development of the genre. Brett Mills cites Darrell Hamamoto, who argues that despite “... attempts to respond to social changes in order for sitcom content to remain comprehensible, the commercial nature of the institutions which produce the programs inevitably leads to ‘repression’.”⁶² This has clear consequences for the ability of the format to engage the viewer to examine their own attitudes, prejudices, beliefs or

⁵⁹ Brett Mills, “Comedy Verité”, *Screen* no. 45 vol. 1 (Spring 2004), 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶¹ Hartley, “Situation Comedy, Part 1”, 78.

⁶² Darrell Hamamoto, *Nervous Laughter: Television Situation Comedy and Liberal Democratic Ideology* (New York, NY: Praeger, 1989), quoted in Brett Mills, “Comedy Verité”, *Screen* no. 45 vol. 1 (Spring 2004), 64.

opinions. Mills argues that this divests comedy of its anarchic role, and replaces it with “... a repressively commercial one.”⁶³

Therefore, with the format changing little, it follows that sitcom audiences will possess preconceived notions and ideas of what to expect from the viewing experience. “The look of sitcom ... is one which foregrounds the aspects of its own performance, offering pleasure in the presentation of verbal and physical comic skill.”⁶⁴ The aim, therefore, by way of its stable and identifiable visual and verbal signifiers, is to quickly indicate its comic intent, and to inform the viewer that its sole purpose is to entertain them through laughter.

By having a visual form and genre characteristics that are not only as coherent as possible but are also distinctive from those for serious programming, the sitcom can be seen to revoke its claim to engage with anything other than its humour function.⁶⁵

The audience therefore, accepts its artificial performances, stage sets, its affected dialogue and the fact that the laughter track is telling them that it is supposed to be funny, and that they are supposed to laugh, in return for the pleasures afforded by the genre; in fact, the listed features are often themselves the very sources of pleasure. There is something reassuring and comforting for the viewer in having their expectations satisfied, and in already knowing the formula but finding enjoyment in watching how the comic situation will play out and be resolved. However, its failure to engage in social issues, at times resorting to stereotype, is problematic, and the main criticism of the genre, as demonstrated here. Brett Mills states how comedy and entertainment generally are

⁶³ Ibid., 64.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 67.

considered “ ... low cultural texts ... ”⁶⁶ which are seen as unworthy of serious study. Further, this perception contributes towards the failure to see the potential offered by situation comedy for serious and productive social engagement.

Sitcom’s distance from standard forms of realism is indicative of the assumption that serious subjects should be treated seriously, and that there are appropriate forms and genres for doing so.... by distancing itself from the verisimilitude associated with other, more serious genres, sitcom form signals its intentions to be understood as nothing more than entertainment.⁶⁷

However, developments occurring in the genre of sitcom since the mid-nineties have demonstrated the potential for the format to provide a platform for serious engagement in social developments, to restore comedy’s anarchic and subversive role, to interrogate the very medium of television and, crucially, to hold a mirror up to society, questioning its attitudes, beliefs, perceptions and morals.

The Royle Family (1998-2000, 2006, 2008, 2009) is a key text, which prompted a groundbreaking change to the sitcom format. This show favoured low-key acting, the absence of a studio audience or laughter track, the absence of full lighting or the three-headed monster, but retained the studio set. Laughter arose as a result of small gestures instead of heightened or wacky performances, and the audience is encouraged to feel complicit while watching this family at home in their sitting room.⁶⁸ However, while elements of the tragic can be found, it can still very much be perceived as a warm, family comedy. Nevertheless, it signalled stylistic changes as described above, which took advantage of the fact that media savvy audiences, well used to the sophisticated

⁶⁶ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁸ Wickham, *Understanding Television Texts*, 115-116.

developments in other television genres such as drama and documentary, could enjoy an alternative and rewarding version of the situation comedy.

In the same cultural moment, Channel Four's *Brass Eye* (1997, 2001) used the characteristics of current affairs programs to “ ... lay bare the contradictions and ideologies of such programming ... ”,⁶⁹ an important development in that this was a comedy show which critiqued television itself.

Both *The Royle Family* and *Brass Eye* paved the way for a further interrogation of social issues and the medium of television itself, the former through its alterations to the sitcom format, the latter through its utilisation of other television formats for comic material. However, it was through Ricky Gervais' and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* that the potential was realised for a thorough reassessment of not only sitcom's rigid stylistic features, but its ability to engage with serious social issues, to present the audience with material which required contemplation, and the examination of their own attitudes and behaviours. It contained not only a critique of television as a medium, but the manner in which it is received by its viewers.

⁶⁹ Brett Mills, “Brass Eye”, in Glen Creeber, Toby Miller and John Tulloch [Eds], *The Television Genre Book: 2nd Edition* (London: British Film Institute, 2008), 80.

CHAPTER THREE

I do not like the man who squanders life for fame; give me the man who living makes a name.

- Emily Dickinson.

It will be argued in this chapter, that through its deviation from the traditional sitcom format, *The Office* can interrogate the issues raised in Chapter One with regard to both public perception of ordinary persons appearing in the public eye, in this case through a docusoap, and in the media generally, together with their own perceptions of themselves. If critics castigate docusoaps for satisfying “... the knee-jerk amoralism that has become a hallmark of the 90s ...”,⁷⁰ then *The Office* responds as a fictional narrative to the effect the gaze of the television camera, and by extension the audience, has on its manager, David Brent. Like his many real-life counterparts, Brent has clearly identified an opportunity for fame on foot of the workplace docusoap in which he is participating. Before analysing this character, however, it is first necessary to examine *The Office* in terms of the extent to which it deviates from traditional sitcom form, together with its use of the docusoap format to understand how the powerful emotional engagement and subversive representation of people’s relationship with celebrity culture is achieved.

What is initially striking is the abandonment of “... the standard upbeat music and brightly lit opening titles associated with many other sitcoms.”⁷¹ Its opening credits show a glum, spiritless industrial estate in Slough, and the accompanying soundtrack is a melancholy dirge that, together with the grim imagery, appears to promise despair and hopelessness rather than laughter and comedy which, as discussed in the previous

⁷⁰ Mapplebeck, “The Mad, the Bad and the Sad”, 9.

⁷¹ Mills, “Comedy Verité”, 69.

chapter, is what audiences are conditioned to expect as a result of the sitcom's desire to signal its comic intent early and unambiguously. Further, the abandonment of the studio set and artificial lighting, together with the adoption of hand held documentary style camera work, completely alters audience expectations of the 'look' of the sitcom as discussed in Chapter Two, as the program more closely resembles a documentary. This provides a new type of viewing experience for the audience, as they must draw upon their knowledge of other televisual genres to understand the value of this decision on the part of the program makers. This is the first step in turning a passive entertainment expectant viewer into one that must engage with what they are watching.

While *The Office* does conform to certain traditional sitcom characteristics, such as “ ... the single setting, the recurring characters with conflicting personalities and the single narrative problem in each episode”,⁷² these features are not always treated in the traditional way, and this also assists in altering the viewing experience.

While there is a particular narrative problem in each episode, these subplots play out against the backdrop of what Ben Walters describes as “ ...a contained narrative”⁷³ which plays out across all fourteen episodes. It is as a result of this that, unlike the traditional sitcom, the status quo is not restored at the end of each episode and, as becomes painfully apparent, a happy ending is not always guaranteed. “It was therefore able to exert an unusually strong narrative pull on its audiences – crucial ... to its appeal.”⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid., 69.

⁷³ Ben Walters, *The Office: A Critical Reading of the Series* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 123.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 124.

The setting is extremely realistic rather than reflective of the stylised or artificial appearances of many traditional sitcoms, and this, together with the faux-documentary effect, “ ... makes for a different viewing experience from the conventional sitcom, with implications for both characters’ behaviour and viewer response.”⁷⁵ The working environment is drab, generic and claustrophobic, and employees are constantly seen yawning and looking like they’d rather be anywhere else. This is also a source of humour, as employees are seen arguing over desk space or playing practical jokes on each other to make the day bearable. However, behind this too is a misery that resonates with the viewer, considering “ ... *The Office* rehearses complaints about the stifling frustrations of jobbing work – particularly bureaucratic or clerical work – that have been made throughout modernity.”⁷⁶ One of the things about sitcom that makes it the perfect genre for the exploration of social issues, is that audiences can build “ ... an emotional rapport with sitcom characters, an association founded in realistic characterisation that has often been laced with intimations of despair.”⁷⁷ As Edwin Page explains, “ ... by encouraging recognition of certain situations and characters which not only arise within office environments, but also in most workplaces, Gervais broadens the possibility of audience empathy.”⁷⁸

While sitcom’s penchant for wacky performances is a source of humour and lends an affability to its characters, they do not necessarily come across as realistic, which supports the claim discussed in Chapter Two, that sitcom’s purpose is merely to entertain.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 124.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 129.

⁷⁸ Edwin Page, *Horribly Awkward: The New Funny Bone* (United Kingdom: Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd., 2008), 67.

However, in line with the realism of the setting and the use of the documentary format in *The Office*, it is clear that such performances would jar in this environment, which is precisely what marks David Brent out from the rest of his colleagues, but this will be discussed in more detail later. The issue with heightened visual and vocal performances is that they may provoke laughter regardless of the material, but “... without the real, honest or serious dedication to circumstances, a performance threatens to lose an essential comic integrity.”⁷⁹ It is this integrity which helps to create real emotional engagement between the audience and the characters in *The Office*. Audience members are detached from farcical and over the top characters, and observe them passively as sources of amusement, but the appearance on screen of realistic characters they can identify with facilitates their engagement with the characters and their situations, encouraging a thoughtful and active viewing experience.

The comedy of *The Office* is also far from traditional. Firstly, the marked absence of a laughter track means that the audience is not told when something is intended to be humorous and therefore must decide themselves what they consider to be funny. Further, what marks the comedy of *The Office* apart from traditional sitcom is the fact that it is more likely to make the audience squirm or cringe with embarrassment, as issues of gender, race and one-upmanship are often portrayed in an extremely awkward manner. This is a source of immense discomfort for the viewer, and sometimes, but not always, humour. Viewing may be unpleasant and hard to watch as opposed to being easy entertainment, but, as Page explains, an

⁷⁹ Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 119.

... intellectual response is vital in regards to horribly awkward humour. You have to be aware of the fact that a joke is being made, and astute enough to pick up on the nature of that joke.... With such an abundance of not-at-all-politically-correct content, an audience that reacts with knee-jerk emotional responses is bound to find much that is objectionable.⁸⁰

He also explains, “We may find that laughter isn’t necessarily a by-product of our responses. We may even wonder at the nature of our responses from an objective standpoint ... “. ⁸¹ This positive consequence of awkward viewing or cringe-inducing humour can also be achieved through the removal of the laughter track which, as previously stated, leaves the viewer to decide what they consider to be humorous. Further, they may actually ask themselves why this is the case.

If, therefore, the audience is watching *The Office* from an intellectual standpoint, this opens up its capacity for social engagement and compels the audience to consider what is happening on screen, and to assess their own attitudes towards it. *The Office* responds to this need to subvert the knee-jerk response in order to understand something intellectually. This works from both a comic perspective, and as a response to the much criticised audience habits when watching docusoaps or reality television for voyeuristic pleasures and entertainment off the back of someone else’s misery. If the audience suspends their knee-jerk reaction to David Brent’s objectionable behaviour and considers why he is the way he is, then it is possible that this detached mode of viewing will force them to re-examine their attitudes to ordinary people in the public eye generally, especially considering Brent’s obsession with fame.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁸¹ Page, *Horribly Awkward: The New Funny Bone*, 13.

The popularity of fly-on-the-wall documentaries as discussed in Chapter One, meant that audiences came ready prepared to accept and understand the format of *The Office*. However, changes were also made in this regard that prompted a new viewing experience. The upbeat music and bright opening credits associated with the docusoap, for example, were abandoned, thus divesting the format of its premium on entertainment. Absolutely crucial to the alteration of viewing mode was the abandonment of the “... fast-paced editing style, chopping together short sequences and alternating between a limited number of narrative strands per episode”⁸² that characterised the docusoap. Instead, Gervais and Merchant opted for extended, often painful shots fraught with silence and generally following an excruciating occurrence. The sharp editing of the docusoap is responsible for the lack of critical engagement in the viewer, as no time is allowed for anything on screen to resonate with the audience. This is evidence of its privileging of entertainment over the searching social commentary for which documentary has generally achieved its respect in the past.

Documentary portraiture at its most interesting allows spectators their own reading. The popular documentary tells us what to think, with commentary pointing us in the right direction. Viewers are shown that these subjects are sad but cute, hopeless but hilarious.⁸³

Prolonged shots of agony on the part of David Brent and his work colleagues restore this social commentary to the documentary genre, even if this is a fictional narrative. This act on the part of Gervais and Merchant also succeeds in blurring the line between the comic and the serious discussed in Chapter Two, which proves liberating for the sitcom format and allows for a constructive examination of both the characters, with all the necessary

⁸² Bruzzi, “Docusoaps”, 138.

⁸³ Mapplebeck, “The Mad, the Bad and the Sad”, 9.

depth that the sitcom allows, and those that watch them. Further, the use of staff interviews when combined with this deep characterisation allows the viewer to perceive how the characters view themselves, and compare this with how they actually behave in reality. It is notable that this is not always a source of humour, as the discrepancy between self-perception and reality is revealed at times to be rather tragic. The aim of this section is to explore how all of these changes to the sitcom genre as made by Gervais and Merchant, together with the adoption of the fly-on-the-wall documentary format, succeeds in exposing both the audience's attitudes towards the participants of these shows, and the monstrous behaviour of the participants themselves. In this regard, the focus will now centre on the character of David Brent.

The manager of Wernham-Hogg paper merchants, David Brent is a character who, based on his prior knowledge of such shows, has clearly identified the fly-on-the-wall documentary taking place at his workplace, as the perfect opportunity to seize his chance for fame on foot of it. He satisfies in every sense the type of person described in Chapter One who feels the need for the media's gaze and the public's approval to qualify their very existence, and will do anything in order to achieve this. However, he is the only person in *The Office* who appears to possess this desire, and therefore stands out in stark contrast to the rest. If both the sitcom and the docusoap are criticised for privileging stereotype and caricature over realism and veracity, in this hybrid of both genres, David Brent appears to believe that this is what is expected of him, "Brent recognizably understands the requirements of docusoap, and sees himself as naturally able to fulfil them."⁸⁴ As a result, his performance is exaggerated when compared with the realistic

⁸⁴ Mills, "Comedy Verité", 73.

characters and natural environment of his workplace, as he consistently plays up to the cameras, more often than not, with disastrous consequences for both himself and his colleagues. This questions the obsession with social caricature that characterises the docusoap and highlights its dangers. In the first episode of series one, he performs embarrassing impressions of well known television personalities, talks about raising money for charity while staring pointedly at the camera as if to win the approval and admiration of the audience for his concern, and tells a member of staff, Gareth, to eat the jelly in which his stapler has been set as a prank, because there are people starving in the world “ ... which I hate”,⁸⁵ before again looking to camera as if to prove his compassion while ironically ignoring the complaint Gareth is making. Indeed, he constantly informs the camera in his interviews that his staff come first, but his actions demonstrate otherwise as proven when, at the end of the episode, he fires his receptionist Dawn in front of a new member of staff as a practical joke, and she ends up in tears before saying “You wanker. You’re such a sad little man”.⁸⁶

This first episode provides an excellent introduction to David Brent. He is egotistical, embarrassing, cringe-inducing and somewhat detestable with no obviously endearing characteristics. So desperate is he to be considered popular and funny with the audience at home, that he “ ... insensitively tramples over his workers ... ”.⁸⁷ His looks to camera at those times when he realises his attempts at humour have backfired contain a desperate concern for the damage that is occurring to his on-screen image as a result of his failure to achieve the intended responses from his victims. As his desperation to be popular and

⁸⁵ Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (Writer-Directors), *The Office: The Complete First Series* (United Kingdom: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 2002), episode 1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.1.

⁸⁷ Mills, “Comedy Verité”, 69.

funny before the camera informs every aspect of his behaviour, it means he does not behave appropriately as a manager, an employee, a colleague, or a friend.

As discussed in Chapter One, talent is not necessarily a pre-requisite for fame where the consumption of celebrity culture is concerned, but nevertheless, David Brent is at pains to prove his talent as a comedian, and the discrepancy between his perception of his talents, and the reality of them can be difficult to watch. This also provides the viewer with another reason to dislike him, as “ ... to appear too ambitious, too outrageous, too performative is to invite audience disdain”⁸⁸ where those used to watching docusoaps and reality television are concerned. In series one, episode two he states, “There’s a weight of intellect behind my comedy”,⁸⁹ without any evidence of his comedic talent having been provided. He cannot see the cruelty inflicted upon him by his colleague Chris Finch, as he is more interested in the fact that they could be seen as a comedy double act by the viewers at home. He tells the cameraman,

To be honest I think you’re mad to let me and Finchy on the bleedin’ telly. We’re like Morcambe and Wise when we get together. Actually, not Morcambe and Wise, ‘cos there’s no straight man so there’s no dead wood. I’m more sort of character based and he’s more of a gag man.⁹⁰

The implication here is that they are better than two of the most respected comedians in British entertainment history, Eric Morcambe and Ernie Wise, and this is a testament to the size of his ego. Up to this point there is nothing endearing about Brent. He is the archetypal fame hungry reality show participant that audiences love to loathe. In series one episode four, he even turns a training session into an impromptu gig to display his musical talents.

⁸⁸ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 151.

⁸⁹ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Complete First Series*, 1.2.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.3.

The first series, then, portrays an egomaniac whose self-image does not correspond with what the viewer is witnessing, and his unabashed self-interest is outrageous. “His inability to perform appropriately in social situations, coupled with an enormous sense of self-importance, creates a monster of a boss whose employees are powerless to question him.”⁹¹ The viewer has, at this point, adapted to the pace and style of the sitcom but has little reason to find Brent endearing and is more likely to find humour in his inability to cease selling himself as a valuable commodity to anyone who will watch or listen. However, the audience’s relationship with David Brent changes in the second series when two branches of the company merge into one, and he finds himself in a subordinate position working for a new boss, Neil Godwin.

Brent sees an introductory meeting between staff from both branches as an opportunity to shine, but his “ ... lunchtime gig ... ”,⁹² containing impressions of sitcom character Basil Fawlty, and comedian Harry Enfield, amongst others, falls flat. Again, his look to camera is one that shows deep concern with how he is going to appear on television. However, in this instance, his look is prolonged, and is uncomfortable for a different reason. He stares as a man, not a monster, who desires to be loved, “ ... dissatisfied and unhappy with his lot in the world, desperately reaching out for that which he thinks will bring him plenitude or ontological and existential wholeness. His desire to be famous reveals emptiness at the core of his being.”⁹³ Therein lies the tragedy of David Brent. This look to camera does not invoke laughter, but a nervous embarrassment and the first pangs of pity in the viewer. The prolonged shot as his staff leave the room begs the question, in

⁹¹ Mills, “Comedy Verité”, 69.

⁹² Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (Writer-Directors), *The Office: The Complete Second Series* (United Kingdom: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 2003), episode 1.

⁹³ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 3.

what world would somebody feel the need to do this to themselves, and in what world can a spectator enjoy the sight of such degradation? Without a cynical voice over, farcical music or sharp editing, it divests the scene of any potential humour, or derision, and inspires thought and reflection, even shame at having witnessed it.

His inability to behave appropriately, either with his staff or his boss, is a direct result of his attempts to court the favour of the audience at home.

He even refers to himself as a “ ... chilled out entertainer ... ”⁹⁴ despite evidence to the contrary. He also makes continual attempts not to appear racist or sexist, but he fails to negotiate the various situations adequately because his desperation to entertain at all times takes precedence over what is appropriate, and this ironically contributes to his lack of popularity, making him all the more hungry for audience approval.

Throughout all of this, his pieces to camera fail to correspond with his actions, and while this is a source of humour and disbelief at how deluded he is, the more the series progresses, the more desperate he becomes to rectify the image of himself appearing on screen by over compensating in his interviews, and the less humour is guaranteed by them. Still, he cannot see that his premium on comedy and entertainment is, with each episode, stripping him of respect and any popularity he might hope to have achieved. Interesting, therefore, is the decision not to include any interviews in series two episode two. This coincides with the very peak of Brent’s frustration and jealousy at his manager’s popularity. His behaviour on screen, devoid of the interviews in which he consistently speaks himself up, is tragic, and there is very little to laugh at. He asks the new staff who have come with Neil from Swindon, “Who thinks Neil is more of a laugh

⁹⁴ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Complete Second Series*, 2.1.

than me?”⁹⁵ and is crushed when the unanimous response is in his manager’s favour. This results in a public outburst where he says to Neil, “Just want to be popular as the new boss. Oh love me. Pathetic.”⁹⁶ The obvious irony of this is that his comment better suits his own behaviour. The episode ends, following a severe dressing down, with him reading his own bad quality poetry to Dawn.

Having now put himself forward as musician, comedian and poet, it would appear that fame is David Brent’s goal, regardless of the basis for it. As he sits with Dawn in his office and offers her a beer, he attracts real sympathy, and while still trying to impress her with his impressions, they take on a strange poignancy. Because the action is taking place in the privacy of his office, and he doesn’t appear to realise the camera is on him as it films through the blinds, he is honest in saying that he is fed up and upset and this lends a human element to his monstrous behaviour.

What makes this interesting is that it is the influence of the camera upon him that makes him monstrous. In Chapter One, Ben Thompson was cited as having asked, “By what quirk of evolutionary development has humanity reached a point ... where situations in which a camera isn’t present can seem ‘less real’ than those in which one is?”⁹⁷ Where David Brent is concerned, most of his appearances on camera are highly performative and do not correspond with the reality of who he is. He himself is not engaging in reality, because if he was, he would not behave towards either his manager or his colleagues in the despicable ways in which he does. But here, through being filmed privately, David Brent has been witnessed in a moment of true reality. He expresses his real feelings and

⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.2.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 2.2.

⁹⁷ Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office: Revised Edition*, 388.

becomes human. In this case, what is appearing on camera is more real than what would normally appear on the performance and caricature driven docusoap. In this way, Gervais and Merchant expose the genre for its focus on entertainment and failure to achieve any productive social engagement, and by allowing Brent a moment of humanity that makes the audience reassess their opinions of him, they open up an alternative and socially engaging means of exploring someone's character without relying on sensationalism.

In series two, episode five, as the staff of *The Office* raise money for Comic Relief, the extent of David Brent's desperation for fame and popularity, and the value he places on television and the media is laid bare. Further, a critique of the exploitative nature of fly-on-the-wall documentary programming is undertaken. While Tim, the most likeable employee is telling the camera, "I just don't want to have to join in with someone else's idea of wackiness ...",⁹⁸ a member of staff is being stripped by his colleagues, and he cries out, "Bastards. My wife and kids are gonna see this".⁹⁹ The camera cuts back to Tim who continues, "... and that's what today is all about. Dignity. Always dignity."¹⁰⁰ The charges levelled at the makers of such programs, as discussed in Chapter One, are often that they promote wacky performances and fail to show any respect for participants, that they exploit them and encourage audiences to engage in victim voyeurism. However, this scene raises the issue of the exploitation of ordinary people on television in an extremely negative light. Further, because it is verbalised by Tim, the most sympathetic character in the program, the audience is forced to assess whether they consider this to be exploitative, and to ponder the moral and ethical concerns which arise as a result.

⁹⁸ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Complete Second Series*, 2.5.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.5.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.5.

David Brent finally speaks outright of his desire to become famous as a result of his participation in the program, and further, inadvertently reveals the extent to which he considers being in the public eye as being the very measure of success:

You've seen me entertain and raise money but maybe I'd like to do that in the future for a living, use my humour and my profile to both help and amuse people. And if it's ideas for TV shows, you know, gameshows, or whatever you want, I'm your man. I'm already exploring the entertainment avenue with my management training, but you know I'd like to do that on a global scale really. And that's not me going, 'oh look at me today, I'm entertaining whilst saving lives, aren't I brilliant?' It's going, if you think I'm brilliant, then give generously and help save those guys who are starving but are also brilliant. Not as entertainers, a lot of them can't even speak English. Don't give them their own gameshow, but save them from dying at least, and then maybe they could do something in their own country on television.¹⁰¹

David Brent satisfies the definition of the postmodern individual discussed in Chapter One; on the one hand, narcissistic, self-reflexive and egotistical, while on the other, empty, lonely and anxious, perceiving the media as the centre of meaning making, authority and self-affirmation. Indeed, the real world appears so banal to him compared to the delights offered by the media centred world of fame and recognition, that he is motivated solely by the fantasy that he will one day become part of that world. It is this fantasy which gives rise to his unacceptable behaviour and ultimately leads to his downfall.

Following the offer of obligatory redundancy, series two episode six, the final episode, is the darkest of both series. Seeing Brent hand around his business cards to indifferent employees on his last day makes him a deeply sympathetic sight. Gervais and Merchant use the awkward pause to powerful effect when Brent is having his picture taken by a

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 2.5.

journalist that has witnessed his second sacking, this time by the motivational speaking company he has worked for, and must endure a painful wait for the flash to light up. Devoid of respect and dignity, Brent is a tragic figure who, despite all his arrogance and wrongdoings, evokes immense sympathy in the viewer. The emotional heft of this episode is intense and painful to watch, as this is followed by his reduction to tears as he begs senior management for another chance to prove himself. As Ben Thompson states, “This idea – that there are some things which are so terrible or so private that they should not actually be broadcast for the idle diversion of strangers – is just about as close to heresy as it is possible to get on twenty-first-century TV”,¹⁰² and this is exactly what *The Office* highlights. Such is the anguish and discomfort in this episode that it forces a re-examination of the moral and ethical considerations surrounding the appearance and consumption of ordinary people in the public eye.

Ben Walters cites Joe Moran who observes, “*The Office* tricks the viewer into letting down her guard and laughing at something that turns out to be rather tragic.”¹⁰³ Feelings of guilt arise from having laughed at a tragic character, a human being rather than a reality show contestant or a colourful docusoap caricature. It succeeds in questioning fly-on-the-wall documentaries and docusoaps as forms of entertainment, and shows in painful detail how desperation for fame can compromise one’s dignity. In line with the blurring of the boundaries between public and private that characterises contemporary celebrity culture, nothing is out of bounds where the docusoap is concerned, and

¹⁰² Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office: Revised Edition*, 415.

¹⁰³ Joe Moran, *Reading the Everyday* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), quoted in Ben Walters, *The Office: A Critical Reading of the Series* (London: British Film Institute, 2005), 121-122.

watching a human being lose his job all because he wished to be popular is not easy viewing, and intentionally so, as it forces the viewer to re-examine their attitudes towards such programs.

As discussed in Chapter One, the shaping of real life for the purposes of entertainment, and the resulting equation of sad and pathetic with hilarity and amusement, succeeds in negatively altering real life responses and attitudes towards our fellow man, but *The Office* ensures that Brent's departure is void of hilarity and suggests that characters deemed to be sad or pathetic deserve a more humane response, if they should be televised at all.

Another notable occurrence in this final episode is Tim's decision to ask Dawn out for a final time. In doing so he takes his microphone off and the viewer is left not knowing what is happening, and barely able to see them through the blinds of the meeting room. This is frustrating for the voyeur hungry viewer used to seeing the intimate minutiae of people's lives in forensic detail, especially considering the emotional investment that viewers had in their blossoming yet obstacle ridden relationship. But, as Ben Thompson observes, "At first those watching at home feel cheated, and then they realize that by way of those few moments of silence, a little bit of lost humanity has been restored to them."¹⁰⁴ Again, *The Office* succeeds in subverting notions held by contemporary consumers of celebrity culture that nothing should be private, and that if you are in the public eye you should expect to have to reveal all. The lengthy pause leaves enough time for an initial reaction of disappointment, followed by contemplation, and then the feeling that it is right that the personal should remain so.

¹⁰⁴ Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office: Revised Edition*, 415.

Following these two series, *The Office* returned in 2003 with a two-part Christmas special, the premise being that the BBC were returning three years later to catch up with past and present employees of Wernham Hogg. It begins with David Brent accusing the BBC of portraying him unfairly, a point raised in Chapter One with regard to program makers' responsibilities towards participants and the fact that the shows are edited with entertainment as the priority.

... the BBC must have taken away about 8 hours of footage a day ... and most of it was ... there's a good guy, he's getting on, he's their friend as well as their boss, he's a motivator, an entertainer, oh he's made one mistake like any human would, should we just cut that out? No ... put that bit in, cut the other stuff out, we want a scapegoat, we wanna dumb down, we wanna give them the biggest plonker of the year.¹⁰⁵

He is clearly upset about his portrayal, and has obviously had a negative response from the public as a result. These two episodes are interesting in that they occur after the documentary has aired and provide an insight into the reaction of participants following their appearance on television. This is an opportunity that docusoap participants or audience members alike are seldom afforded, and therefore is of crucial importance in the context of altering public perceptions of how those in the public eye should be treated. Once these participants disappear from our screens, it is not possible to know the impact that their time in the public eye has had upon them or their lives, and in a culture that "... privileges the momentary, the visual and the sensational ...",¹⁰⁶ it is unlikely that the public would care. Indeed, as discussed in Chapter One, some even believe they should expect to be exploited on foot of their participation in such shows.

¹⁰⁵ Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (Writer-Directors). *The Office: The Christmas Specials* (DVD) (United Kingdom: BBC Worldwide Ltd., 2004), part 1.

¹⁰⁶ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 6.

On meeting David Brent again, he describes how he must endure people shouting insults at him and that his response to them is, “What have you ever done on telly? Nothing!”¹⁰⁷ This proves that he still sees television as a medium through which he must pass in order to gain the attention of the media, which he continues to privilege and respect and see as the only means of becoming worthy. After all, despite public abuse, and complaints about his televisual representation, he has agreed to take part in another show, and further, is making public appearances in nightclubs across the country on the strength of his initial television appearance. This is down to the fact that, as Ellis Cashmore citing Christopher Lasch explains,

‘The media give substance to and thus intensify narcissistic dreams of fame and glory, encourage the common man to identify himself with the stars and to hate the ‘herd’ and make it more and more difficult for him to accept the banality of everyday existence’¹⁰⁸

He may be working as a salesman, but David Brent is not happy to surrender the shot he has at fame. Despite spending £42,000 releasing his own single, which sold only 150 copies, he still persists. He says,

I have been given an opportunity that it would literally be a sin to waste, so build on it yeah? They took a normal guy and they said ‘let’s see what the nation thinks of him’, and the nation seems to be saying, ‘yeah, what else you got?’ so duty calls. I seem to be able to give pleasure.¹⁰⁹

This is another case of self-perception running counter to reality, as his nightclub appearances reveal that he hasn’t anything to offer which indicates that his professed

¹⁰⁷ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Christmas Specials*, 1.

¹⁰⁸ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus Press, 1980), quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 6.

¹⁰⁹ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Christmas Specials*, 1.

talent is indeed negligible. What these appearances also reveal is the extent of the abuse to which the public subjects him, as drinks are poured over him and bottles thrown at him, while verbal insults, taunts and cruel laughter occur nightly.

As Ellis Cashmore states,

The peeper's delight in watching others being denuded of their dignity in full view of millions might seem a world away from the callous pleasures taken by patrons of cock-fighting, bear-baiting, and other blood sports in previous centuries. Yet there was cruelty in both kinds of enjoyment.¹¹⁰

Aside from Brent's motivational talk in the second series, these are the only instances in *The Office* where a physical audience is present, and with Brent posited firmly in the role of victim, the television audience must assess their own opinion of him in the context of his treatment at the hands of these audience members who serve as an extension of their own behaviour towards people in the public eye.

His stare at the camera as he comes off stage is uncomfortable to watch and long enough to make the viewer wonder why a person, having already been publicly humiliated three years previously, would continue to put themselves forward for it in the pursuit of fame. Following one event, the backstage scene is shot in such a way that sympathy for him is overwhelming despite his obvious narcissism, as he stands alone, a tragic character and victim of fame culture.

He eventually tells his agent, "I don't wanna do these any more ... it's just demeaning ... they didn't love me, they didn't care, if they loved me why are they throwing stuff?"¹¹¹

Gervais and Merchant succeed in exposing the cruel nature of audience's attitudes towards those in the public eye by revisiting David Brent on his quest to make the most

¹¹⁰ Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 201.

¹¹¹ Gervais and Merchant, *The Office: The Christmas Specials*, 2.

of the fame he has achieved through his appearance in *The Office*. In this way, the audience are invited to view docusoap and reality show participants as human beings, despite their narcissism and hunger for fame, and to witness the impact that merciless reactions have on them. Further, the scenes are difficult to watch, which also critiques the manner in which these shows are filmed to encourage victim voyeurism.

Despite being banned from Wernham-Hogg because of his increasing visits, another reason to view him as a tragic and lonely character, he is invited to the Christmas party. When he finally finds a compatible date through an agency, and she comes as his guest, something changes in David Brent. As she has not seen the documentary, she takes him at face value, and he responds with brutal honesty about his upset at how he was represented and how the public appearances degrade him. Acceptance for who he is, the attention of a woman who is interested in what he has to say, and a sympathetic ear alters him almost instantaneously. When it looks like they will meet again, the viewer is delighted for him despite his questionable behaviour. Further, he has been empowered to the point where he rejects Chris Finch, his one time idol, for insulting his date, and as a result gains instant respect from the audience, and wins freedom from the artificial nature of his performances.

In his last interview, Brent says,

A philosopher once wrote, you need three things to have a good life. One, a meaningful relationship, two, a decent job of work, and three to make a difference. And it was always that third one that stressed me, to make a difference, and I realised that I do. Every day. We all do: it's how we interact with our fellow man.¹¹²

¹¹² Ibid., 2.

Brent has finally learned that through rejecting the superficial mediacentric world that only succeeds in bringing him humiliation, degradation and unhappiness, and engaging with real human beings who treat him with respect, that he can have a fulfilling and happy life. Further, before he departs from this interview, he asks, “Have you got everything you need?”¹¹³ He is not merely speaking to the documentary maker regarding the amount of footage required, it is as if he is asking the fame hungry to look to the lives they have in order to realise that desiring fame can mask the fact that the love and respect they think that media attention and celebrity status will bring, already exists in the real and fulfilling relationships that are present in their daily lives.

Gervais and Merchant have facilitated Brent’s redemption through exposing contemporary celebrity culture as an ugly industry void of humanity, sensitivity and empathy. They have made alterations to the sitcom genre that have made not only this possible, but the socially engaging nature of their work enables an actual reassessment of public attitudes towards ordinary people who appear on television in the hope of becoming famous. His final speech contains valuable advice for those hungry for fame as well as those who enjoy engaging in victim voyeurism.

¹¹³ Ibid., 2.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fame is a mask that eats into the face

- Shaun Williamson, *Extras: The Special*.

If *The Office* portrays the story of the archetypal ordinary man who identifies his opportunity for fame on foot of the camera entering his workplace, thus reflecting the contemporary obsession with fame and the simultaneous desire to deride those that wish to achieve it, then Gervais and Merchant's next sitcom *Extras* depicts the existing celebrity who has achieved traditional merit-based fame, and is similarly celebrity obsessed, but who must alter their relationship with the media in order to retain it.

Extras follows its main protagonist Andy Millman and his best friend Maggie as they work as extras on various films and television shows. Like *The Office*, the laughter track has been dispensed with, it is a workplace-based sitcom, it relies in part on the same cringe-inducing humour for its comedy, Ricky Gervais plays the lead role, it takes place over fourteen episodes, has fame as a central theme, and mirrors the contained narrative format. But when examined as a whole, it is a very different program.

Each episode involves a genuine celebrity playing themselves in a leading role that subverts public perceptions of them. This is a rich source of comedy, and gives immense audience pleasure considering “... the contemporary interest in rendering celebrities, and the idea of being a celebrity, more ‘ordinary’ – an idea which pivots on the related discourse of ‘democratization’.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 13.

Andy Millman is, unlike David Brent, an affable ‘everyman’ who is genuinely entertaining and has made the leap from office job to extra in pursuit of his dream of becoming an actor. If he could be compared to anybody in *The Office* it would be Tim, as the audience can easily relate to him. His reactions to some of the antics of the stars with whom he is working is a great source of humour, and he comes across as an immensely likeable character who merely says what everyone at home is thinking. He and Maggie have a strong friendship which is also a source of laughter and the majority of the warmth which emanates from the program. At the start of the very first episode, he describes his work as an extra as “... absolutely demeaning, I don’t know why I put myself through it”,¹¹⁵ and by the end of it, he is showing sincere kindness to actor Ross Kemp who has just been revealed as a coward. Both of these instances reveal his humanity.

Andy attempts to get a line in every episode of the first series, however, which reveals his willingness to degrade himself in the name of progression, and sometimes he succeeds, but each time an incident, arising either as a result of him defending someone who has been treated badly, or as a result of someone else’s behaviour, prevents it from happening. This encourages the audience to sympathise with him, and maintains his likeable, down-to-earth nature.

The smug, self-satisfied character of Greg acts as a foil to Andy’s good nature as he regularly appears on set to assert his superiority over Andy by informing him of the latest speaking part he has succeeded in getting with a named star. In the first episode he asks Andy, “So what’s your part in this epic then? What are you, fourth seaman from the

¹¹⁵ Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2* (Great Britain: Sphere, 2006), 19.

left?”¹¹⁶ Andy’s acerbic responses to his put-downs further serve to make him an extremely likeable character that has won the audience’s full support.

Andy’s incompetent agent Darren Lamb is a huge source of frustration for him, amusement for the viewer, and sympathy for Andy. However, it is a testament to Andy’s humanity that, despite the importance of his dream of becoming an actor, as evidenced by his efforts to get speaking parts, he tells Maggie, “I can’t fire him, can I? I can’t bear to see his stupid little face. He’d be devastated.”¹¹⁷

The first series ends on a high note for Andy when the BBC agrees to film a pilot of his sitcom, ‘When the Whistle Blows’. The audience shares his triumph when, in series one episode six, a visibly jealous Greg cannot congratulate him. Maggie, however, having been reprimanded by Andy for initially jeopardising his chances with the BBC, and informed by her mother that “... maybe you should try and do something with your life”,¹¹⁸ is feeling low. Despite Andy’s apology and the fact that they make up at the end of the series, it is clear that they are about to embark on two different paths in the second series.

Before leaving the first series, however, it is important to assess the issues raised concerning contemporary celebrity culture, even before Andy’s impending rise to fame, and the manner in which they are dealt with throughout. The first character which merits attention is Darren Lamb’s assistant, played by actor Shaun Williamson, most famous for his role as Barry Evans in *Eastenders* (1985-). The fact that Darren only ever refers to him as Barry is evidence of the fact that the public considered Barry and Shaun as being

¹¹⁶ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2*, 22.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 268.

one in the same person, and this provides a commentary on how “The famous are caught in the collapse of the public/private and are often forced to be continually in role, in performance, as media beings.”¹¹⁹ This is demonstrated in episode six when Darren forces him to “Do your serious.... Do your comical.... He’s a singer as well.”¹²⁰ The pathetic nature of the character of Barry affected Shaun’s capacity to get future acting work following his departure from *Eastenders*, and he all but disappeared from the public eye as a result. In *Extras*, he plays a comic/tragic character who is a victim of the public’s capacity to make and break celebrities as discussed in Chapter One. Darren and Shaun make a wonderful comedy duo, but the latter’s dark and incisive lines resonate with the audience who, together with the media, are culpable for destroying the careers of such celebrities. In episode one he despondently proclaims, “This isn’t living though, is it?”¹²¹ and shows through his humour and sensitivity that there is a real human being behind his image. His representation, when contrasted with the audience’s preconceived notions of him, is transgressive in its ability to prompt serious thought as to the treatment of those in the public eye. Further, it serves to question the veracity of media representation.

Episode four of the first series is of central importance to *Extras* as a whole, and stars entertainer and comedian Les Dennis. Unlike the other celebrities that feature throughout the sitcom, their main function, aside from the subversion of preconceived ideas regarding their personalities and behaviour, being that of humour, Les’s performance resonates deeply in the context of his treatment at the hands of both the public and the media from the late nineties onwards. In this episode he addresses his treatment head on

¹¹⁹ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 34.

¹²⁰ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2*, 250.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

as a human being as opposed to a media image worthy of derision. Les participated in the second series of *Celebrity Big Brother* in 2002 and, as Cashmore observes, such shows,

... exploited consumers' malicious fondness for public shaming and the real attraction shifted from the victors to the heartlessly, hopelessly vanquished.... Viewers patiently endure the endless formalistic routines in the hope that some spontaneously indiscreet behaviour will erupt.¹²²

Les provided the viewers with this in the form of live public breakdown. In line with contemporary modes of viewing discussed here, he was not greeted with sympathy, but viewed as pathetic, laughable and worthy of derision. In *Extras* however, he is portrayed as a human being who is deserving of humanity, sympathy and compassion, and this is restored to him through the powerful manner in which he is represented. Speaking to Andy of his on-screen breakdown he says,

It might have been entertaining for you, but I was at my lowest ebb. The shit that was flying around before I went in. I remember I was sitting there one day thinking, what's the point, eh?.... I even considered suicide.¹²³

Les is also seen ringing *Heat* magazine to inform them that he has “ ... just spotted Les Dennis, the comedian and impressionist and actor Les Dennis.... shopping in New Bond Street”¹²⁴ to try and get himself mentioned in the section which lists celebrities which have been seen out in public. This too is testament to the perception of the media as the centre of self-worth and the need to constantly appear in it to remain famous. The fact that the magazine is not interested further proves the transitory and fickle nature of contemporary celebrity culture. The image of Les alone in his dressing room reminiscing about when he was highly successful has a poignancy that is again facilitated by lingering

¹²² Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 201.

¹²³ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2*, 157.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 158.

shots and pregnant pauses that force the viewer to face a broken man with the foreknowledge of how he has been treated in the media, and with no opportunity to respond to the manner in which he has been represented. Andy demonstrates a deep sympathy and kindness towards Les, and the fact that he is the audience members' onscreen representative in *Extras*, encourages this kind of reaction towards victims of bad publicity as opposed to the usual viewer response of mockery, laughter and ridicule.

Again Gervais and Merchant prove that through their work they succeed in challenging audience perceptions of both the people on screen and their own behaviour. Sean Redmond describes how "Fame damage.... not only draws people closer to the injured star or celebrity, but it offers up the potential for resistant behaviour and for a critique of the machinery of fame (and capitalism) to emerge."¹²⁵ While Les Dennis's experience has proven that reality television is where such damage is enjoyed, not sympathised with, Gervais and Merchant have proven that through their portrayal of fame damage, they succeed in provoking resistant behaviour and a critique of celebrity culture. Where Redmond's connection of fame with capitalism is concerned, it is easy to see how the more celebrities are regarded as products to be consumed, the less likely they are to be viewed as human beings by their consumers. This contributes to the desensitised behaviour of the public towards celebrities, as they view them in terms of their use value. The commencement of series two shows the same Andy with which the audience are familiar, but a number of incidents which occur across the series succeed in altering his character, and he becomes increasingly egotistical and fame obsessed. In the first episode, he is clearly unhappy with the sitcom pilot he is filming. He says,

¹²⁵ Sean Redmond, "Intimate Fame Everywhere", in Su Holmes and Sean Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 40.

I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing.... This is not the comedy I set out to do. I wanted something real that people could relate to and it's all changed because people have stuck their nose in.... I wanted to write a good, credible comedy that would stand the test of time.¹²⁶

With Shaun on standby to take over should Andy pull out, he is again forced by his agent to perform, this time, the show's catchphrase. The exchange between Shaun and Darren is revealing.

Agent: ... The thing about Barry is, and I've noticed this, right, people will laugh at him, they never laugh with him, it's extraordinary. Look at that face, there's a sort of undercurrent of tragedy to it, isn't there? (To Shaun) Do it.

Shaun: (as RAY) 'Are you having a laugh? Is he having a laugh?'

Agent: (laughing) I love it because he's desperate.¹²⁷

While this is a hilarious piece of dialogue when performed on screen, it is also immensely dark. Darren provides a commentary on how celebrities like Shaun are perceived by a discriminatory public who view his pathetic nature as a source of laughter and worthy of derision. They don't relate to him as a human being but laugh at him as an object, and this is, as Darren says, extraordinary. He also recognises that there is a tragic side to this, which can be seen in the fame victim's face. However, like the public, he forces him to perform for his amusement, and declares that he gets pleasure from Shaun's desperation. Darren simultaneously highlights the cruelty to which Shaun has been subjected by the public in his life and the impact this has had on him, and subjects him to the same treatment to highlight public opinion that the more desperate, the more entertaining.

¹²⁶ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2*, 293-294.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 295.

Inspired by Shaun's decision to leave *Eastenders* because " ... the writers turned [*his character*] into a joke ... ",¹²⁸ Andy tells the BBC executives that he thinks the sitcom is dreadful, and that

I don't want to get on television for the sake of it. I don't want to be famous for the sake of it, I want to do something that I'm proud of. And I won't be proud of shouting out catchphrases in a stupid wig and funny glasses. I want to do what I want to do, otherwise I'll hate myself for the rest of my life.¹²⁹

Iain, the BBC's Head of Comedy, tells him that he either does it their way, or the show will not go ahead. Andy cannot walk away from the chance to be on television, to become famous, despite the integrity shown in his speech, and therefore despite his unhappiness, he goes ahead with the sitcom. As Edwin Page explains, Andy is " ... caught in a 'catch 22' situation of having to create a lowest common denominator show to get anywhere at all."¹³⁰

Ellis Cashmore cites Philip Hensher who asks, "Isn't it worrying that so many people, inevitably failing in their fantastic dreams through lack of talent and lack of application, embark on a life they will always regard as second best?"¹³¹ The viewer can never know the extent of Andy's talent as he never gets to prove it, but it is certain that in the name of fame, he has done just that. The sympathy for Andy at this point is powerful, however, his decision to compromise himself shows evidence of his potential to be motivated by fame.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹³⁰ Page, *Horribly Awkward: The New Funny Bone*, 75.

¹³¹ Philip Hensher, "The Reality of Modern Celebrity", *The Independent*, 24 November 2004, 33, quoted in Ellis Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006), 205.

The second episode sees Andy's sitcom get terrible reviews, but high ratings. As Edwin Page explains, he has created "... a hideous beast of a prime time sitcom, heavily reliant on catchphrases and clichés. This brings derision from critical circles ... but the public love *'When the Whistle Blows'*."¹³² Fully aware of the workings of contemporary celebrity culture, Andy asks, "What am I going to do now? I'll never get over this, I'll just spend years and years trying to claw back credibility by doing anything, just popping up in bad films and charity events, just begging forgiveness."¹³³ Andy, therefore, is not so much fame hungry at all costs at this point, but desperate for credibility and respect from his peers, and the fact that he has succeeded in drawing in 6.2 million viewers and is still disappointed, is further proof of this. When Maggie suggests he could appear on a celebrity reality television show, he replies, "Why would I do a show that, when I watched it, I was praying for a tsunami?"¹³⁴

Andy confides in musician and actor David Bowie, who clearly appears to be a hero of his, about his unhappiness, and this again encourages audience sympathy because of Andy's honesty and openness. However, Bowie degrades him by singing a humiliating song about him, and encouraging the crowd to join in.

He sold his soul for a shot at fame. Catchphrase and wig and the jokes are lame. He's got no style, he's got no grace. He's banal and facile, he's a fat waste of space.¹³⁵

With the camera lingering on Andy as his dignity is severely compromised, Gervais and Merchant further succeed in encouraging sympathy for him. This is enhanced by a shot of the smug Greg laughing from the crowd. So hurtful and damaging to Andy's ego is this

¹³² Page, *Horribly Awkward: The New Funny Bone*, 74.

¹³³ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Illustrated Scripts: Series 1 & 2*, 345.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 345.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

incident, that he returns to his local pub where he allows himself to be treated like a commodity by the fanatics of his sitcom that frequent it. This demonstrates further evidence of Andy's desire for fame, as it proves he is now happy to be worshipped by the people he most dislikes; those who enjoy broad common-denominator sitcoms and catchphrase based comedy shows.

Over the next three episodes, Andy becomes a victim of bad journalism as he is misrepresented in the press, a commentary on how the public soak up stories regarding celebrities for pleasure, regardless of whether or not there is any truth in them. His hurt and disappointment reveals the effects of fame damage discussed earlier in this chapter with regard to Les Dennis and Shaun Williamson. Here, Gervais and Merchant expose the pain behind the headlines through a likeable and sympathetic character who evokes sympathy in the audience. In episode four, Chris Martin, lead singer with band Coldplay, appears as a celebrity who only does charity appearances to promote his image while Andy is far more sincere, and his incredulity at Martin's behaviour shows his continued humanity despite his increasing desire for popularity.

As with the first series, he keeps getting into trouble for incidents that are not his fault and this further engenders sympathy for him. However, a successful appearance on the popular BBC chat show, *Friday Night with Jonathan Ross* (2001-), in the final episode, serves as the main catalyst for Andy's transition to celebrity status, as it results in the blossoming of a friendship between Andy and the famous host. He begins to detach himself from Maggie, and for the first time, becomes less likeable as his ego begins to take over. This is important in that it echoes the connection between fame hunger and a lack of humanity or consideration for others as evidenced in the behaviour of David

Brent. He name-drops expensive restaurants and light entertainment based celebrities who have accepted him into their circle, but in whom he would previously have been unlikely to show any interest. This is indicative of the fact that he is starting to get caught up in the notion of fame and celebrity as opposed to the credibility, respect and critical acclaim he so craved in the first place.

Andy's behaviour is contrasted with Shaun's loneliness and despondency and Maggie's unhappiness, neither of which he notices as a result of his increasing egotism and ascension through the hierarchical fame structures. Andy increasingly loses touch with both himself and those around him, proving that "Fame hunger is a malaise of our times."¹³⁶ However, he demonstrates that his humanity has not entirely disappeared when, at the end of the series, he honours a promise to visit a seriously ill boy in hospital rather than meet his hero, actor Robert De Niro.

The second series was followed in 2007 by a feature film style special. It begins with a despondent Andy sitting, detached, in the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, and is followed by the subtitle "6 months earlier".¹³⁷ Through foreshadowing Andy's participation in a television show on which, in series two, he swore adamantly he would never appear, Gervais and Merchant inspire a critical mode of viewing with regard to Andy's behaviour across the special, thus engaging the viewer to re-examine their perceptions of fame culture both from the perspective of how human beings act on foot of becoming famous, and how they are received by the public.

¹³⁶ Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 205.

¹³⁷ Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant (Writer-Directors), *Extras: The Special* (DVD) (United Kingdom: British Broadcasting Corporation/HBO, 2007)

Andy's show is still popular with the public, and audience members sport t-shirts with the show's catchphrases on them. However, Andy is visibly jealous that Greg has gone on to receive critical acclaim, and is starring alongside Hollywood film star, Clive Owen in a blockbuster movie. Greg describes Clive as "... such a down to earth guy, he's so real",¹³⁸ which supports the notion that celebrities must be perceived as ordinary and authentic in contemporary celebrity culture in order to win the approval of the public.

Andy continues to crave credibility despite proving his popularity with paparazzi and public alike, and turns down small parts in popular television shows in the name of integrity. Further, he says, "Not in a million years"¹³⁹ to Darren's offer of *Celebrity Big Brother*, which is ironic considering the viewers' foreknowledge that he will eventually agree to it. It is interesting again that it is Shaun who provides valuable words of advice for Andy. Quoting French painter Henri Matisse he states, "Derive happiness in one's self from a good days work, from illuminating the fog that surrounds us."¹⁴⁰ This echoes David Brent's final redemptive speech, but is a lesson that Andy has yet to learn in his continued pursuit of critical acclaim. Shaun plays the role of the Shakespearean Fool who is increasingly dismissed by Andy as idiotic and pathetic, but is the character who has real wisdom to impart, and which those in need refuse to take on board, often at their peril. This infuses Shaun's character with a wisdom and sensibility that runs counter to the audience's perception of him as worthless and laughable, thus restoring his value, humanity and dignity.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Andy is approached by a top class agent, Tre Cooper, who massages his growing ego, and this results in Darren being fired as his agent, despite earlier assurances that he never could. This is demonstrative of Andy's transition from kind, caring individual to one hungry for credibility and celebrity at the cost of his loyalty. Further, through Tre's company, Gervais and Merchant really succeed in exposing the business of celebrity as a superficial, cruel, capitalist and shallow enterprise. They provide evidence of the fact that visibility means more than talent in contemporary celebrity culture, as Tre explains, "Success in this business [*is*] all about getting your face seen."¹⁴¹ Further, " ... with the designation of categories from the A- to the Z-list of celebrities now a part of popular cultural discourse, there is a bid to establish an ordered taxonomy of fame.... it remains a deeply hierarchical phenomenon."¹⁴² This is proven when he explains to Andy that he is C-list, and will never be A-list unless he wins a coveted award or becomes a successful director, for example, but that "We can get you to the top of the B-list pretty quickly just by making sure you're seen out and about; movie premieres, celebrity gay weddings, stuff like that."¹⁴³ When presented with a list of " ... newsworthy trollops"¹⁴⁴ to be seen leaving clubs with, Andy is genuinely shocked that this is what is being asked of him, and refuses to engage in this strategy as a route to fame. However, his desperation for popularity does not wane when, having been informed by Tre that his catchphrase is no longer number one, he declares, "Well if they want catchphrases, I'll given them catchphrases",¹⁴⁵ irrespective of his highly vocal dislike of catchphrase-based comedy

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 11.

¹⁴³ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Special*.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

throughout the first and second series. Further, when asked where he wishes to be in five years time, he states, “Sat in my Hollywood mansion watching my butler polish my Oscar.”¹⁴⁶

It is at this point where audience sympathy shifts. In both series, Andy was likeable and sympathetic, often suffering at the hands of Maggie’s stupidity and Darren’s incompetence, but when these two characters are seen genuinely struggling on foot of Andy’s behaviour, he is no longer perceived in a positive light. This allows the audience to critique the impact of fame on an individual, as Andy becomes more monstrous with each scene. As discussed in Chapter One and Chapter Three, fame is seen as the source of bounteous rewards in contemporary celebrity culture, but here it is responsible for the creation of monstrous behaviour and is a source of pain and hurt for those surrounded by it. Gervais and Merchant have therefore created a platform that forces the audience to contemplate these negative developments.

Maggie demonstrates the conviction and integrity that Andy cannot when she walks away from a scene which would degrade and humiliate her, despite the fact that she is appearing alongside the same Hollywood star with whom Greg is starring, and wins the audience’s approval as a result. This is a crucial development, as the viewer is not disappointed at the prospect of being denied a peek at her humiliation, rather, they cheer her on. In this way, Gervais and Merchant succeed in negating the necessity for victim voyeurism, celebrating instead the respect, dignity and humility so often absent in contemporary televisual entertainment. Maggie’s actions also run counter to Andy’s decisions to compromise himself in the name of fame, and her dignity when contrasted

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

with Andy's increasingly questionable behaviour, highlights the negative effects of fame hunger on an individual.

Maggie is stunned when she sees Andy fire an extra and reprimand the floor manager stating, "Why are the extras running around bothering me? Why aren't they in their paddock or wherever you keep them?"¹⁴⁷ He even goes so far as to tell Maggie, "You can't keep coming up and talking to me in front of the other extras. They see you, they go, oh she's an extra, she's his equal, maybe we're his equal."¹⁴⁸ Andy's ego has clearly consumed him, and this is further evidenced in his refusal to take any work offered by his agent, as he considers it all beneath him.

The tide turns, however, when Andy abandons the sitcom. He sneers at the BBC's head of comedy after being reprimanded by him for his arrogance and lack of professionalism, and tells him, "Don't worry about me, the phone won't stop ringing."¹⁴⁹ Andy is out of the public eye within weeks, which is demonstrative of the nature of contemporary celebrity culture which, as stated in both Chapters One and Three, privileges the momentary. It appears he has learned nothing from the experiences of Les Dennis or Shaun Williamson, which is a testament to his arrogance. But he is beginning to see that "The moment [*celebrities*] withdraw or become reticent, we lose interest and start peering at others. Just as we vote wannabe celebs out of the Big Brother house, we can send celebs to oblivion. And we know it."¹⁵⁰ In contrast to Andy's success, Maggie is living in a grubby bed-sit with no money and, having given up working as an extra, has taken a labour intensive job in a kitchen. If Andy complains about why he is not being recognised

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Cashmore, *Celebrity/Culture*, 4.

or considered credible, and has been given the worst table in an upmarket restaurant, Maggie is just glad to be sitting down. They are now worlds apart, and while she listens patiently to his problems, Andy is no longer interested in hers, instead consumed by his narcissistic obsession with being famous. This contrasting of the two characters and the shift in sympathy facilitates a critique of the fame hungry, and has the capacity to teach those who desire it a lesson as to its power to destroy an individual and their valuable relationships. Andy is warned by Maggie, that if he continues to behave as he does, “No matter how successful you are, you’ll never be famous enough.”¹⁵¹

Having been sacked by Andy, Darren is seen working in a mobile phone outlet with Shaun and another former *Eastenders* star, Dean Gaffney, also a victim of negative media attention in his personal life. While an obvious source of comedy, this shows the discriminatory nature of celebrity culture where, if a famous individual is out of favour with the press and the public, their career is over. Again, Shaun provides words of wisdom when he warns Andy, “Be careful mate, fame is a mask that eats into the face.”¹⁵² He is proven right when Andy degrades himself by taking jobs he never said he would, and is seen begging to be let into the same exclusive restaurant where he was welcomed at the height of his fame. This is not only indicative of Andy’s willingness to humiliate himself in his pursuit of continued fame, but of the superficial and hierarchical nature of celebrity culture generally.

Following weeks of being ignored by his agent, Andy embarrasses himself by breaking into the restaurant to see him. Tre again verbalises the nature of contemporary celebrity

¹⁵¹ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Special*.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

culture when he says, “ ... they either want you or they don’t. Life’s cruel.”¹⁵³ Andy declares that he wants both fame and fortune, and respect and integrity, but Tre presents him with an ultimatum. “There are only a few people in the world who have both those things, and you will never be one of them. What do you want?”¹⁵⁴ Andy, clearly humiliated, replies, “Rich and famous and on the telly.”¹⁵⁵ His desires are clear, and this sees him enter the *Celebrity Big Brother* house.

Where celebrities are already a prerequisite ... the authenticity of the show is marked by the supposed provision of insights into the hidden ‘real’ aspect of celebrity personality. Phil Edgar-Jones, the executive producer of *Big Brother*, described the second *Celebrity Big Brother* as a stripping away of celebrity personas: ‘With normal *Big Brother* we’re making ordinary people extraordinary. With this, we’re making famous people very, very ordinary’.¹⁵⁶

Ben Thompson describes how “ ... a willingness to endure the same humiliations that members of the public have been willing to put themselves through in the dogged pursuit of fame becomes pretty much a mandatory condition for continued celebrity status.”¹⁵⁷ Andy Millman is proof of this, in that he must engage with this reality television show, something he was adamant he would never do, in an attempt to win the public’s approval, and to retain his fame. He appears alongside archetypal celebrity participants who all vie for the audience’s good opinion, and are representative of the fact that “Hot and cold celebrities turn up on reality TV using the format to suggest they are free of the chains of

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Biressi and Nunn, *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*, 147.

¹⁵⁷ Thompson, *Sunshine on Putty: The Golden Age of British Comedy from Vic Reeves to The Office: Revised Edition*, 387.

performativity and artifice.”¹⁵⁸ Andy, however, becomes visibly introverted and contemplative as he ponders his behaviour and the reasons behind his willingness to continually put himself through degradation and humiliation in order to remain in the public consciousness. Andy asks celebrity housemate Lionel Blair why he is participating in the show, to which he responds, “Just keeps up the profile.”¹⁵⁹ Andy points out, “But you’ve been performing for forty years, aren’t you bored with just having to be on all the time?”¹⁶⁰ to which Blair replies that he aches, and drinks to numb the pain. This paints a very tragic picture of the merit-based celebrity who must remain constantly in performance mode, and be seen doing so, if they wish to retain the celebrity status they have earned through hard work and talent.

While *The Office*’s documentary style facilitated character engagement with the audience with subversive and transgressive consequences, Andy’s appearance in *Celebrity Big Brother* enables his direct engagement with the audience through surveillance cameras. This is extremely powerful, as it occurs at the point where he is not only realising the error of his ways, but is acknowledging that the audience is culpable for treating people in the public eye with such disdain and disrespect. This forces the viewer to acknowledge their negative attitudes and behaviour. His prolonged looks to camera are uncomfortable as he stares outwards from his prison at the people whose approval he so craves, all too aware of the pleasure they take in indiscriminately hailing or destroying its humiliated participants. But his performance is no longer of that nature which seeks their approval, it is one which critiques the machine of fame. When asked at what point he realised he

¹⁵⁸ Holmes and Redmond [Eds], *Framing Celebrity*, 28.

¹⁵⁹ Gervais and Merchant, *Extras: The Special*.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

wanted to be famous, he replies “I didn’t think I did just want to become famous ... but obviously I do just want to be famous, why else would I put myself here with a load of other desperate people?”¹⁶¹ He continues, “We must be desperate, why else would we come on a show where you have to hand in your dignity at the door?”¹⁶²

His final monologue before he leaves the house is one of the most powerful scenes in the history of situation comedy, and through it, he verbalises the whole flawed nature of contemporary celebrity culture, and lays the blame squarely with the public, the celebrities themselves, and the media.

What are we doing selling ourselves, selling everything?... I’m just sick of all these celebrities just living their life out in the open. Why would you do that?... And the papers lap it up, they follow us around and most people think we’re important and that makes us think we’re important. If they stopped following us and taking pictures of us, people ... wouldn’t care, they’d get on with something else. They’d get on with their lives.... And fuck you, the makers of this show, as well. You can’t wash your hands of this, you can’t keep going, ‘it’s exploitation but it’s what the public want.’ No. The Victorian freakshow never went away. Now it’s called *Big Brother* or *X-Factor* where in the preliminary rounds we wheel out the bewildered to be sniggered at by multi-millionaires. And fuck you for watching this at home. Shame on you. And shame on me. I’m the worst of all, because I’m one of those people that goes, ‘I’m an entertainer, it’s in my blood.’ Yeah, it’s in my blood, because a real job’s too hard.... and I have someone bollocked if my cappucino’s too cold or if they look at me the wrong way.¹⁶³

Andy subsequently appeals to Maggie as his best friend for forgiveness, and has clearly seen the error of his ways. These are powerfully emotional scenes which blow apart the façade of the celebrity industry for the cruel, victimising, superficial, capitalist enterprise that it is and expose the shameful behaviour and attitudes of the voyeur hungry, sneering

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

consumers of contemporary celebrity culture. Humanity is restored to Andy, as Maggie watches him tearfully from her sofa, and comes to meet him following his decision to leave the house despite the manner in which he has treated her. Through rejecting fame completely, Andy is emancipated and, like David Brent, finds happiness and fulfilment in a real, organic relationship with his best friend Maggie.

Through *Extras*, Gervais and Merchant convey the gravity of the lessons that need to be learned by both audiences and the fame hungry individuals willing to prostitute themselves in order to achieve or retain celebrity status. The media is similarly castigated for its role in contemporary celebrity culture. The strong and valuable message for both the media and celebrity consumers alike, is that if the media did not set celebrities up for ridicule, there would be nothing for the public to consume, and the world would be a better place because human beings would live in reality as opposed to an artificial world which privileges exploitation, performance, mockery and victim voyeurism. Gervais and Merchant use the theme of redemption in both sitcoms, as both David and Andy's "... previous actions are redeemed by the humanity they display, by their own realisation of their mistakes. Through this redemption our view of them is changed ...".¹⁶⁴ This engenders a powerful engagement with the viewer thus forcing them to re-examine their attitudes and behaviour towards those in the public eye. For those whose ambition it is to become famous, they are similarly obliged to question the consequences of pursuing and achieving their dream.

¹⁶⁴ Page, *Horribly Awkward: The New Funny Bone*, 81-82.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to examine how developments in contemporary celebrity culture were represented in Ricky Gervais' and Stephen Merchant's *The Office* and *Extras*, and to prove that alterations made by Gervais and Merchant to the television genre of situation comedy allowed for a sustained critique of the behaviour and attitudes of both audiences towards those in the public eye, and the celebrities themselves as they seek audience approval. The aim was to understand the relationship between celebrities and consumers in the new celebrity culture of democratisation, to examine the effects this democratisation had on media audiences, ordinary people seeking fame, and those merit-based celebrities who had to change their relationship with the media in order to retain the fame which originally came as a result of their hard work and talent.

Chapter One traced the changes occurring in contemporary celebrity culture since the mid-nineties when visibility took precedence over talent, and the ordinary individual rose to fame through programs like the docusoap and reality television. These changes ensured that the lives, attitudes and behaviours of its consumers would alter dramatically, as celebrity culture became increasingly democratised. It was no longer solely the media that had the power to make or break stars, the public now had the capacity to confer celebrity status on those who sought their approval. This dissipated the audience's satisfaction with admiring and idolising from afar, as they became more involved with celebrity making and breaking. As a result, those showing signs of pretentiousness were derided, while those appearing as 'ordinary' or 'real' were seen as more authentic by audiences, and therefore more worthy of their attention.

It followed that the traditional merit-based celebrity would have to alter their relationship with the media and appear more down-to-earth in order to retain the audience's approval. This resulted in a fame of compromise for those who had worked hard for talent-based fame, as the dispersal of the division between public and private saw them reveal more of themselves than they had ever needed to before in order to remain in the public eye, and to court the audience's favour. These changes altered a formerly respectful, adoring and admiring public into voyeur hungry peeping toms who viewed victims as a source of entertainment, did not consider talent as being a prerequisite to celebrity status, valued vices over virtues, and were more likely to deride those appearing in the public eye than to admire them. Solid evidence of this was provided in Chapter One with reference to an audience survey undertaken by the Broadcasting Standards Commission in 2001.

Docusoaps and reality television shows, watched by millions, invited a desensitised, cruel and dehumanised, mode of viewing which was encouraged by program makers who privileged frivolity and entertainment over the representation of reality. Such shows, as evidenced in Chapter One, were deeply criticised by theorists and critics alike for their encouragement of victim voyeurism, and their failure to challenge their viewers in any way. It followed that, as a result of the opportunities afforded by these shows, it became open to any individual to attempt their ascent to celebrity status, and they were as likely to succeed as they were to fail based on the audience's response to them. Therefore, the public's contemporary obsession with fame extended beyond merely consuming it, they believed that they too could achieve it. In the pursuit of a fame which was likely to last only a short time, in an era privileging the momentary and sensational, they often suffered degradation, humiliation and embarrassment.

Research conducted in Chapter One revealed that some critics saw this new celebrity culture as arising from public perception of the media as the source of self-validation and social distinction, and confirmation that an individual is worthy and significant. So important is the media world, that what occurs in it is seen by some, they claim, to be more authentic than real life. Some theorists connected this to the nature of postmodern identity, which is as fractured and anxious as it is vain and egotistical. Those engaging in narcissism and self-reflexivity perceive identity as being the centre of self-worth, but this identity can only be validated by appearing in the media.

Chapter Two traced developments in situation comedy that occurred in the same cultural moment as developments in contemporary celebrity culture. Described by critics as a rigid format which utilised simple stereotypes and failed to engage with social or political developments, its commercial imperatives subverted comedy's anarchic power and resulted in repressive content, divesting it of its capacity for social engagement. Its 'look' was seen to foreground performativity and it offered pleasure in the witnessing of comic skill. It very obviously indicated its comic intent, and encouraged a specific reading. It was distinct from serious programming to the point where it could not deal with the serious, only the comic, and was therefore seen as nothing more than entertainment.

Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant responded with two groundbreaking sitcoms, *The Office* and *Extras*, both of which represent and engage with other televisual formats and genres, the former, the docusoap, the latter, reality television, enabling a critique of performance and representation in the media. They succeeded in breaking down the barrier between the serious and the comic, as there is both comedy and tragedy in both. Through their work, they have altered the sitcom from benign entertainment format to

socially engaged programming. This is done through abandoning the characteristics that forcefully distinguish it from other forms, and engaging the viewer in a pensive, contemplative mode of viewing which challenges them to examine their behaviour and attitudes, particularly with regard to the relationship between celebrity and consumer.

Chapter Three explored how *The Office* is subversive in its adoption of the docusoap format to represent the ordinary man, David Brent, who sees his opportunity for fame, allows it to influence every aspect of his behaviour, and suffers humiliation, degradation and embarrassment as a result. He typifies the fame hungry, narcissistic and anxious postmodern individual described in Chapter One, and is subjected to abuse at the hands of a cruel public whose responses were also discussed in Chapter One. Gervais and Merchant abandoned the fast-paced editing and lively opening credits that were typical of the docusoap, portraying instead a slow paced, drab and banal world more indicative of real life experience. Instead of caricatures, their representation of human beings with real feelings and emotions had a striking effect on the audience who, through experiencing deep characterisation and often painful viewing, were forced to look at a victim of fame culture in all his glaring tragedy, to accept culpability for the usual derision and mocking laughter that such an individual would invite, and to question these types of responses.

The study of *Extras* undertaken in Chapter Four showed how it traced the transformation of a likeable 'everyman', Andy Millman, into a monstrous fame hungry being, completely obsessed with celebrity to the point where he loses touch with himself, those who love him and the world around him. Here, the audience is presented with another fame victim who, through entering the *Celebrity Big Brother* house, experiences a transformation and succeeds in admonishing the media, the audience, celebrities and the

fame hungry through speaking directly with the viewers at home by way of the ubiquitous reality television camera, thus achieving redemption from his monstrous fame obsessed behaviour. Again, this is a sitcom which demonstrates its capacity for engagement with social issues, in particular, contemporary celebrity culture, and succeeds in engendering an intellectual viewer response as opposed to a passive entertainment based one. In this way, the audience is encouraged to question their treatment of celebrities, and the machine of fame in general. This is enhanced by the presence of real fame victims such as Les Dennis and Shaun Williamson, who are given their opportunity for redress, and as a result, evoke shame in the audience who realise they have not contributed to the downfall of media images, caricatures or representations, but real human beings.

Empathy and redemption are central themes in both *The Office* and *Extras*. They both represent and address the consumers of contemporary celebrity culture in a subversive, critical and socially engaging manner. Through choosing to focus on the ordinary man attempting to become famous in *The Office*, and the existing celebrities who must degrade and humiliate themselves in order to retain their fame in *Extras*, both sitcoms can be seen to effectively address the impact of developments in contemporary celebrity culture on both categories of individuals. Happiness and satisfaction for both come with the elimination of their obsession with fame and their realisation that only through embracing their own reality, can they find true contentment.

Both sitcoms end with the strong message that our humanity needs to be restored through the re-examination of audience attitudes and behaviour towards those in the public eye, that there is more to life than being famous, that the media cannot offer the fulfilment and

rewards it appears to promise, and that true happiness, respect, admiration and self-validation can be found in the real and organic relationships that exist between ourselves and our fellow human beings.

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