Becoming Iconic

BARRY KING
Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Contemporary popular journalism and cultural commentary are marked by the widespread proliferation of the term "iconic" in a way that departs from its traditional, sacred meaning, albeit carrying the aura of the former into a new context of representation. The semiotic processes underpinning this usage are explored to expose the shifting relationship between sign forms and the construction of cultural value under advanced capitalism. Linking Peircean semiotics to Marxian sociological categories, a new "formation of celebrities" (the Iconae) is identified that melds market success with the concept of the intrinsic qualities of persons and things— though in celebrity discourse things are the properties of persons. The immediate rhetorical function of the term "iconic" is to promote celebrities as the victors of a tournament for popular approval. In this process, the concept of the popular becomes subjected to the formation of a hierarchy as the ostensible expression of "natural" talent.

Keywords: Frankfurt School, iconic power, commodification, reification and personification, physiognomy, physiocratic inequality and hierarchy

Over the past few decades, popular culture has become established as a field of study, with an expanding range of journals and websites providing fora for discussion and debate. In a parallel development, a generation of graduates and postgraduates has entered into the cultural industries as practitioners, journalists, and commentators. One striking feature of this development has been the pervasive substitution of the adjective *iconic* for *popular*. The root noun "icon" is not, of course, a new entry into the lexicon, though it has acquired contemporary shading. From the mid-20th century, the traditional meaning of "icon" as a religious emblem has been steadily displaced by a new meaning: "A person or thing as representative of a cultural movement; important or influential in a particular (cultural) context" (Oxford English Dictionary, CD-ROM 2009).

To give a few examples of the many people and things that might have once been termed famous, renowned, emblematic, or legendary: Marilyn Monroe is an iconic Hollywood star; F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* is an iconic American novel; President Trump, pace Brecht, claims to have built several iconic buildings and plans to build a wall; Kobe Bryant is a Lakers icon; Joe Fraser, in a bout with Muhammad Ali, landed an iconic punch; Bob Dylan, who once declared "iconic" is a term for a has-been, is himself a fashion icon as is, in a more arriviste example, Demi Lovato (Brecht, 2017; Dylan, as cited in Brecht, 2017; Butler, 2016; Ewart, 2016; Farley, 2015; Miller, 2012; Sklair, 2017, pp. 15–16).

Barry King: barry.king@aut.ac.nz
Date submitted: 2017–08–19

A vogue word, "iconic" provides a recipe for cliché-warming conflations that suggest a horizontalization of cultural taste—encompassing people, parts of people, buildings, art objects, food, deeds and so on—in which the traditional distinction between high and low forms is set aside in favor of currency. It turns attention away from finicky distinctions implicit in cognate terms such as reputation, renown, celebrity, stardom, and representation. Such promiscuity makes for rapid copy and bestows the resonance of the religious sense of its homonym on mundane struggles for prestige. The afforded resonance is so fruitful that even scholarly reflections, as we shall see, are hard-pressed to resist it. In this configuration, iconic partakes of the quality of a sign with a marked tendency to slide from the universal down toward the personal, burying the former into the very tissues of the latter.

As noted many years ago, "popular" can mean of the people or for the people (Hall, 1981). The term "iconic" insinuates that the popular media has found a way to be of the people[1] (while avoiding the chore of saying what that way is). So the term is a kind of placebo for critical thought: To say something is iconic is to claim it exemplifies its kind without the inconvenience of stating its kind or how it exemplifies. The pervasive use of the contemporary sense of iconic poses some additional questions: For which social groups does this usage create prestige, and what does the seemingly irresistible normalization of this usage marginalize and make barely discernible? How does the referential promiscuity of the term privilege a particular politics of value, as the expression of a coterie of creatively inspired individuals who alone valorize the products and services of collective labor?[2]

The ancient Greeks of Attica referred to the wellborn as the Eupatridae; our equivalents of the eupatridae are formed by the endless celebration of their media and social media images. Those particularly successful in attracting attention and relatively enduring fame can be distinguished from transient celebrities whose personae briefly flare and fade (Rojek, 2001). To mark the former, I use the group term *Iconae*. In the babble of celebrity gossip, the Iconae are those who succeed in the struggle for mass recognition. In what follows, I want to explore the semiotics underlying this process rather than the mechanics, which have been delineated elsewhere in some detail (Rein, Kotler, Hamlin, & Stoller, 1987).

The practice of constructing personae is now endemic (Marshall, 2014). The Iconae are those whose personae attain the highest level of media visibility as measured by the number of tickets sold, recordings purchased, eyeballs captured, and social media "likes" and "followers." What they exemplify is the equation between personal reputation and the logic of market-based commensuration, the reduction of disparate qualities to a common standard (Espeland & Stevens, 1998). To be admitted to the ranks of the Iconae is to become a definitive expression of the formula "if it sells, it tells the story of popular enthusiasms." They are, in other words, the heroes of market populism (Frank, 2000).

In general terms, what follows draws on the work of the Frankfurt School, which advanced the claim that commodification creates a one-sided, solipsistic social physiognomy in which the autonomy of culture is replaced with the manipulation of individual experience (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002). I propose to extend this analysis in two ways. First, I depart from the tendency, most evident in the

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[1] For some, this is because fan activity has increasingly driven the representation of popular culture. How complete a triumph this is, is debatable (Hills, 2013).

[2] In what follows, I concentrate on humans denoted as icons rather than things, though invariably the things called iconic in media discourse are the bearers of celebrity presence, said to be iconic because of the magic of contagion.

Dialectic of Enlightenment, to see commodification as a totally realized process that pervades the sphere of culture, whether high or low. Rather, I view it as a recurrent struggle by capital to capture and monetize popular cultural productivity (Hohendahl, 1993). Second, in post-Fordist context, the distinction between high and low culture production operates as a fractal division reproduced in a plurality of cultural fields that have their own internal logics of distinction (Bourdieu, 1985; Eco, 1986). What is distinctive about contemporary capitalism is the pervasive subsumption of culture production to market demands, a process the Frankfurt School confronted in its infancy.

The term "iconic" is a verbal key designed to enforce an equation between certain perceptible qualities of persons—and things connected to persons—and the social status of individuals (Eco, 2000). Photographic media—particularly the still photograph as the synecdochic resolution of complexity—are intrinsic to this process. The mantra of the iconic operates as the verbal correlate of the process whereby the aesthetics of the artwork gives way to the somaesthetics of she or he who performs (Shusterman, 1999; Sontag,1990). With the rise of Iconae, the magic of contagion replaces the aura of distance (Benjamin, 1968).

Theorizing Icons

It is important to distinguish two broad conceptions of iconicity as a secular expression of "grace." The first rests on the attainment of a post hoc reputation based on a quantitative fact: this or that image, person, or object has been the subject of extensive media exposure and, over time, has become part of the experience of large numbers of people. This use of the term "iconic" seeks to identify the qualities of specific icons:

> We defined icons as those photographic images appearing in print, electronic, or digital media that are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of media genres, or topics. (Hariman & Lucaites, 2007, p. 3)

They further stipulate that not all photographs (or other kinds of objects and images) have these features, and few of them have them in sufficient quantity to warrant being defined as icons. Nor is it clear that iconic photographs have the stability ascribed to them. Rather, they are subject to remediation by memes that suffuse the original image with new connotations based on surface manipulations (Boudana, Frosh, & Caneo, 2017).

What Hariman and Lucaites (2007) identify as just one factor in the impact of icons—their intrinsic materiality—Alexander sees as the primary cause of their power. For him, icons induce a specific condition of consciousness. Echoing Durkheim, Alexander defines icons as collective representations: totemic, tangible surfaces that expose the spectator to the hidden transcendent values underlying social order (Alexander, 2010, p. 324). Going about their unreflective, mundane lives, people use icons as intuitive passports affording access to the transcendent, sacred realm of collective representations (Alexander, Bartmanski, & Giesen, 2012). The power of icons does not rest on carefully articulated cognitive understandings but on the "oceanic" influx of affect:

> Iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social
> value. Contact with this aesthetic surface, whether by sight, smell, taste, sound or

>touch, provides a sensual experience that transmits meaning. The iconic is about
>experience, not communication. To be iconically conscious is to understand without
>knowing, or at least without knowing that one knows. It is to understand by feeling,
>by contact, by the "evidence of the senses" rather than the mind. (Alexander, 2008,
>p. 782)

On the basis of such phenomena, Alexander has called for a "strong program" of research into the autonomous effectivity of qualia—the perceptual fabric of experience.

Icons provide an aesthetic contact with encoded meanings whose depth is beyond direct ratiocination. Iconicity consists of retrieving, activating, and articulating the depth of the signified by introducing it to the realm of immediate sensory experience, connecting discursive meaning with the perceptual and palpable (Alexander et al., 2012, p. 2).[3]

Acknowledging that the production of icons depends on the actions of artists, designers, curators/gallery owners, critics, and consumers, Alexander nonetheless claims that "true" icons are autotelic performers whose efficacy is not reducible to any prior matrix of intention, but generated out of "their" inherent aesthetic powers (Alexander et al., 2012). Consequently, the "authentic" icon transcends its materiality, pointing to what cannot be adequately represented. This rules out, by definition, a consideration of ideology as the exercise of aesthetics in the service of narrow interests.[4] Yet it is difficult to conceive of a spectator who, in feeling and experiencing, is outside the realm of the cognitive discourses and the ethical or moral positions they are perceived to entail. Indeed, it would be interesting to know what kind of subject is not already preformed by such discourses when encountering an image.

Even accepting the circular claim that some icons have a greater affective density than others, can affective density be so readily equated with universality? One might argue the reverse: that the prioritization of sensuous materiality is the high road to solipsism, effecting a premature burial of iconic qualities in the stuff of personal experience. Paradoxically (for an ostensibly sociological account), Alexander's rush to prioritize the sensuous encounter risks counterposing an asocial subject to an asocial image.

A more forthright, even passionate, homage to iconicity is to be found in Daniel Herwitz's theory of the star icon. Star icons epitomize the power of the media in representing the audience's dreams and desires. They can be contrasted to "mere" celebrity as "something quite different, a being caught between transcendence and trauma. . . . An effervescent film star living on a distant, exalted planet, she is at the same time a melodrama-soaked soap-opera queen" (Herwitz, 2008, p. ix). As an aesthetic type, the star icon is a tragic figure in constant danger of being revealed as less than extraordinary. Pursuing a hazardous existence on the edge of being, subject to malign forces (such as paparazzi and gossipmongers), the star icon is beset with forces that threaten to drag him or her down to earth, depleting his or her power over the popular imagination. The aura of the star icon depends on

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[3] Alexander's approach aligns with a trend in art history and visual studies—the so-called iconic turn—that also regards the surface of objects and bodies as promoting the aesthetic transcendence of the mundane into a realm that eludes the grasp of the cognitive.

[4] Though as Eagleton (1991) argues, ideologies of the aesthetic typically claim the status of being beyond ideology.

the suppression of the existential mismatch between the institutional being of the star persona and the limitations of the person who is called upon to manifest it as an empirical reality, on- and—more tellingly—off-screen. For if the king is permitted the distinction of having two bodies—the institutional and the personal—the star icon rests claims to fame on the fate of one: the personal (Kantorowicz, 1957).

Not all film stars are icons, because they are not all bearers of this fateful conjunction between the sublime and the mundane.[5] John Wayne is not a star icon—even though he seems to embody the charisma occasioned by the ordinary/extraordinary couplet. He is not traumatized (at least not as far as the public knew) and, moreover, is a "real man." Star icons tend to be female, and they need not be film stars at all—as was the case with Lady Diana, who, for Herwitz (2008), is the epitome of a star icon. The generalization of charisma to persons who are not entertainers is just one aspect of the tendency to attribute a personality to persons and objects. Far from producing a novel, aesthetically systematic theory, Herwitz's account demonstrates one thing: the compulsion to personify the process of collective symbolization. This evidently describes an effect rather than an explanation of the formation of icons.

Iconicity and Semiosis

The term "iconic" is slippery, not just because it can be a shameless claim to significance but because it is the outcome of a semiotic process. Generally speaking, an icon is a kind of sign form that has an ambiguous relationship to its object (Shapiro, 2008). To appreciate this it is necessary to take a different view of semiosis than that implicit in Alexander's semiological account, which owes more to Saussure than to C. S. Peirce.

Eschewing a binary account, Peirce proposed a threefold scheme of signs. Icons are signs that refer by means of a similarity between the perceived qualities of the sign form and the qualities of its object; indexes (or indices) are formed by a causal connection to their object, and symbols, by the existence of codes and conventions that prescribe standing for an object without any similarity or direct physical connection to it. Because any specific sign form is an admixture of qualities, likenesses, and conventions, distinguishing between sign forms depends on identifying which principle of referring is dominant within a particular sign (Braga, 1995).[6] The three sign–object relationships form a gradient, ranging from the concrete to the abstract. An icon is a kind of sign that sits at the base of the gradient and is, strictly speaking, not a sign at all—but a quasisign, or potential sign whose qualities can be "picked up," and can serve as a sign through a resemblance between its own qualities and some of the qualities found in its object.

This ascent from the level of firstness to the level of secondness entails a semiotic process through which "pure" icons (qualia) are purposively brought into a dyadic interaction with some material form of representation to create a likeness—such as a painting, photograph, or other visual figure. Someone or some process has caused the icon to be materialized or embodied (Eco, 2000).

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[5] Herwitz admits they are icons of a different kind, but never specifies what the other kinds are.

[6] So, for example, Peirce identifies iconic qualisigns in which resemblance is the primary formative principle, iconic sinsigns in which the material of inscription is paramount, and iconic legisigns in which formal rules of relationship, beyond likeness or materiality, are determinant (Short, 2007).

To distinguish such material mentions from "pure" icons, Peirce used the term "hypoicon," an indexically captured sign. Hypoicons, in turn, may ascend to the level of thirdness, where the codes and conventions governing reference are either explicitly mandated or have been hardened by practice into habit. The level of thirdness is the level of the generalization of signs as collective symbols. Acceding to the level of a symbol, the indexically grounded hypo-icon undergoes a process of reduction through abstraction and has the paradoxical and unstable or "degenerate" quality of subsisting as a universal and particular (Ponzio, 2010). To distinguish this new step in an icon's scope of reference, we can say that the hypoicon has become a metaicon—which is the state conjured by the buzzword iconic.[7]

The ascent of a particular sign to metaicon status begins when what was once a metaphorical claim becomes substantially embodied in a singular instance. Like other "icons," Demi Lovato begins life as a metaphor, a hypoicon, claiming the status of a collective representation. Through a concerted effort at self-promotion guided by her "people," such as publicists, dress designers, coaches, trainers, and the like, she strives by images and words to claim definitive and evident ownership of a set of naturally embodied qualities—of attractiveness, beauty, and, above all, being "hot"—which, however manufactured, find instantiation in her person. Should her claim succeed, Demi's persona becomes an icon. Whereas terms like "popular" and "legendary" suggest that the relationship between the admired and the admirers needs investigation, the term "iconic" suggests that popularity resides in the qualities of the icon, thereby transmuting the religious concept of a fetish into the presence of a media image.

Of course, some people will not accept Demi's status as iconic. They consider her an example of the degeneration of iconic potential because there are always other females—Kendall Jenner, Katy Perry, or Courtney Stodden, say—who can claim to incarnate at a higher level of definitiveness the qualities that define the sexy, young, and hot female (Levy, 2005). Such rivals for iconicity seek to deny the chance for further candidates to claim they are "unique" incarnations.[8] For the claim to iconicity is absolute. One cannot be half iconic any more than one can be half a knight or half a diva. Other contenders such as Lady Gaga are vying—with a greater level of media visibility and market profile—to drive Demi into the status of a has-been or wannabe. But this rivalry, even if leading (horribile dictu) to the "fall" of Demi, merely reproduces the logic of the celebrity system, which aims to expunge by singularity other examples of the qualities of a type or category, creating a prototype out of a stereotype (King, 1992).

Capital's Metaphysical Theater

The Iconae, proactively and retroactively, are creatures of commodification. What was once a "local expression" becomes a global embodiment of popular choice through universal distribution as a commodity. Commodification hardens certain associations over others, taking selected qualities of an image and turning them into a metaiconic sign based on mass distribution via the market. If images speak for themselves, commodification, assisted by marketing and publicity, determines which aspect of their speech is made public—a fact that celebrity gossip and social media make abundantly clear through games of authenticity and disclosure.

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[7] The term "hypericon" would be better except that it has been used by W. J. T. Mitchell (1986) to mean a reflexive symbol.

[8] It is worth noting that the qualities of the signifier—in this case, a young female—can support appropriation through iconicity. As witness the attempts by stars to look like Marilyn Monroe, who also found it no easy task to "look like" her own image.

As capitalism constructs its own theater of value, two aspects to this process can be identified, which become increasingly intertwined as market relationships and the money form penetrate everyday life. The first of these has an ontological tenor and is fundamentally sociological. The second relates to semiosis proper and can be seen as carrying through or performing an epistemological manifestation of the context provided by the first. These processes come together as a kind of theater in response to the metaphysics of capitalist culture. By metaphysics I refer to the categorical assumptions about the modes of being that underpin a particular economic system—especially as these relate to people, though, of course, certain assumptions about nature in general are implied (Meikle, 1991).

The feature of capitalist metaphysics I wish to emphasize is the generation, out of its commitment to a privatized system of production, of systematic, rather than intermittent, uncertainty. In contrast to the economy as a system for the production of use values governed in some degree by a social plan, capitalism is a system of private production that relies on market response mechanisms to define what is valuable about a specific exercise of human labor power. For a specific capitalist enterprise and the workers it employs, the market defines ex post facto what is a wasteful exercise of labor power and use of resources—even if what is produced has materially useful qualities. In these circumstances, the problem of attaining the threshold of exchange is an endemic and consequential feature of cultural and, more narrowly, organizational life, posing a recurrent threat to collective well-being, if not survival.

Such circumstances pose questions of efficiency for business plans. What shall be produced, in what quantity, and of what quality becomes a mystery; a calculated gamble driven by competition between rival capitals seeking to avoid wasted investment in plant and labor and, at a further remove, loss of dividends for iinvestors. (Kay, 1977). Uncertainty also poses questions of human agency on a societal scale—who should direct the process of production and plan investment, and what qualities are they expected to possess? So unfolds the hot topic of leadership in management theory.

Generally speaking, two structurally immanent ideological features develop to suspend (if not resolve) pervasive uncertainty. The first of these is reification, the process whereby social relationships between people are reduced to relationships between things, concretized ultimately by money (Marx, 1976). Reification is not a collective or individual cognitive error. Rather it is a structural effect on the consciousness produced by capitalist economic relationships that affects, with a varying degree of alienation, the capitalist class and those social classes subjected to its hegemony (Lukács, 1971; Mepham, 1972).

The second process is personification—things and people become imbrued with abstract personalities or personae (Marx, 1981; Neocleous, 2003). Personification is a fundamental tendency of human consciousness to attribute human motives and feelings to things and nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). However, the generalization of capitalist social relationships of exchange transforms the operation of anthropomorphism. What was once a symbolic process associated with the realms of myth and religion is "disenchanted" by the spread of calculative modes of thought and action, brought on by the process of commodification and its signal embodiment, the money form (Weber, 1993). Traditional concepts of gods and divinities as personifications of the sacred survive but become marginalized as parareligious forms spread through everyday life. Such forms, typified by celebrities, charismatic gurus, and healers, sustain a secularized spirituality focused on the self and its unrelenting quest for betterment (Heelas, 2006).

The process of simulating use values is the dominant aesthetic of marketing and promotion, adding a tissue of personality to the person or thing being marketed (Goldman & Papson, 1994; Haug, 1986). Not only are products and services suffused with human characteristics but the consumer herself is urged to personify the self, confirming the early insight that the consumer is also produced in the process of consumption (Delabare, McQuarie, & Philips, 2011). The entertainment media draw extensively on personification, as a branding resource underpinning stardom and celebrity. In these fields of media production, the ritual projection of creditable selves becomes a pervasive practice—a development foreshadowed by the public theater in the West (Agnew, 1988).

In this development, personal identity becomes something to be proved to others and to the self, only weakly anchored by an ascribed status and ever liable to be exposed as fake, rather than as a consolidated expression of an essence. The vocation of the actor, as a person selling a marketable self, becomes the metaphoric register of ordinary experience and, in the event of success, the metonymic of the power of the market and the money form. The systematic schism between the value of individual labor and what the market recognizes as valuable creates an ambiguous semiotics of identity that revives, even as it desublimates, the metaphors of personification.[9]

The Commodity Signifier

The term "iconic" is intimately connected to the process of pointing and thus naming a concrete individual as its source or its target. Pointing is an example of deixis, where the meaning of expression cannot be fully understood without reference to the context in which it is used. Deixis is fundamentally theatrical, for it is in the theater (and with appropriate empirical adjustments on screen) that the meaning of the onstage action depends for its intelligibility on a lateral or outward reference to a context. This can be a reference to a narrated world—as in anaphora, when what is happening now is referred to a past event, actual or fictive, seen or unseen—or it can refer to the presence, physical and "biographical," of the performer, directly present on stage or indirectly present on a screen (Serpieri, Elam, Publiatti, Kemeny, & Rutelli, 1981). In the context of a specific performance, pointing can be to a character as a personification of some state or process, or it can be overconcretized, pointing to the person who acts. In this latter case, impersonation collapses into personation as the ostensibly intrinsic qualities of a person become the context, rather than a specific individual as an example of a category. When personation occurs, there is a degeneration of a collective symbol into an iconic particular, which if repeated enough can have its conventional origins "forgotten" so far as public awareness is concerned. The potentiality toward an abstraction through particularity is immanent to performance—whether through human or humanlike agents—and is intensified by the commercial decision to create star or celebrity vehicles and, possibly, by the actor's determination to upstage other performers (Krysinski & Mikkanen, 1981).[10]

Icon mongering elides the shift from the level of culturally universal down to the specifics of a particular performance, and below that to the persona of the performer as a public figure. A counterexample may clarify: Without being put to the necessity of citing a specific individual, one may

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[9] It is in this context of signification that the perception of the star as born outside of capitalism as a source of natural values arises—a perception intensified by the celebrity as a unique individual, ostensibly unrestrained by the need to conform to a text-specific character.

[10] Though Krysinski suggests that the focus on the performer, quite in conformity with spirituality, is a defining feature of much contemporary drama (Krysinki & Mikkanen, 1981).

claim that the miner is an iconic worker, comparing the nature of mining as hard, dirty work with manual work as a category. But this gearing of reference toward the categorical rather than the individual is anathema for those aspiring to be iconic, whose raison d'être is to be a personal prototype that dominates a type or category.[11]

The term "iconic" camouflages this preference for a particular route to reference in which a particular individual moves from being an instance of a category to become a thing that possesses the qualities, however conventional or attributed, of the category to which the label refers. Evoking the term "iconic" suggests, evoking the traditional meaning of something inherently sacred, that an iconic individual is the natural exemplar of a category or type.[12] When a specific individual (e.g., Benedict Cumberbatch as Holmes) is declared iconic, the exercise of personal talent is presented as embodying a zeitgeist.[13]

This process of personification, responding to marketing imperatives, drives the framing of reference beyond metaphor into the realm of metonymy and synecdoche. Metonymy posits a bidirectional or mutually defining relationship in which a part stands for a whole or vice versa. By contrast, synecdoche is a unidirectional entailment that eschews the subordination of the part to whole in favor of treating a part as the essence of a category.[14] The formation and direction of the fetish of the persona depends on the legal attachment (and hence protection) of the persona by the index of a proper name. When this happens, synecdochic referral via a proper name (antonomasia) moves in a universalistic direction, evoking generic or archetypal qualities—or in a particularistic direction, introjecting generic qualities into the possessor of a proper name as a legal entity. In this logic, the category of "Old Blue Eyes" belongs to Sinatra, not Sinatra to the category.

Spectacular Realizations

An important element in the formation of the Iconae is the colonization of social life by commodity-driven spectacles (Debord, 1994). As suggestive as this formulation is, it has its limitations. It is disputable that social life is colonized in its totality by commodity relationships—social relationships persist outside of, if recursively influenced by, commodity exchange. Such relationships based on concepts of the gift and use values are in fact necessary for the renewal of capitalist accumulation (Bonefeld, 2011).

Although suggestive, Debord's (1994) theory is not fine-grained enough to engage with the specific mechanisms of collective identity formation in the media as a public sphere. Emerging in 18th-century coffee houses and journals such as *The Spectator*, the bourgeois public sphere is supposed to be an open forum, where private citizens—essentially property-owning males—freed from feudal proscriptions concerning the right to speak, engage in political debate. Historically, the public sphere develops as a failed utopian project as corporate interests, the state on one side and the commercial

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[11] Nelson Goodman's (1976) distinction between denotation and exemplification as modes of reference identifies a similar reversal.

[12] In which case what begins as a casually applied metaphor becomes consolidated through reiteration over time as a fact (Goodman, 1976).

[13] No mistake, Cumberbatch is not the claimant—publicity is.

[14] The assumption that a part epitomizes the whole is known as the synecdochic fallacy (Berry & Martin, 1974).

corporate interests on the other, progressively colonize and set the norms and agendas of public discourse. This process of colonization, whereby representative publicity and promotional culture marginalize democratic forms of deliberation, leads to a refeudalization of civil society, in which only constituted representatives are permitted a public voice (Habermas, Lennox, & Lennox, 1974).

The concept of the public sphere has been subject to extensive criticism for its failure to recognize existing patriarchal, racial, class and heteronormative barriers to open dialogue and participation. If the public sphere is a central element in the organization of human experience, then many communities lack the economic resources, education, and cultural capital necessary to articulate a collective vision of their life world. Existing alongside the bourgeois public sphere, there is a proletarian public sphere that is a potential source of resistance to dominant ideas and the productive site of new forms of political and cultural production (Kluge, and Negt 2016). As a normative projection, the public sphere remains relevant, but its vision (or visions) of civil society fails to engage with sensibilities and affective experiences that go beyond bourgeois cultural ideals and notions of rationality, leading by implication to a range of public spheres (Calhoun, 2002).

The digital integration of communication technologies has transformed the context of mass communication. Alongside the persisting forms of centralized and vertical mass communication there is a massive extension of horizontal interaction, so that communication between hitherto separate groups becomes possible (Castells, 2007).[15] This development suggests a significant countertrend to refeudalization. Oppositional movements can stage image events that capture the attention of the legacy media and, with ever-expanding intensity, social media platforms. In this context, the concept of the public sphere needs to be adjusted to take into account the emergence of new forms of representation and new forms of civic action. A more fruitful approach rests on the concept of the public screen or a realm of screens, encompassing a proliferation of new forms and formats—genres such as talk-show television, reality television, staged political campaigns, sitcoms, documentary and fiction films, and social media platforms and applications (Deluca & Peebles, 2002). Conspicuously, the Iconae are a dominating presence within the realm of screens, acting as a point of "biographical" coherence in an intensely proliferating circulation of images.

The pervasive penetration of social life by digital forms of commensuration—search engines, algorithms, and the like—has been argued to produce a condition of deep mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2013). Deep mediatization rests on prior recalibration of the relationship between identity and social structure, a recalibration intensified by the onset of digital media. Even prior to the advent of digitization, theorists detected a decoupling, or at least a thinning, of the relationship between individuals and collective institutions and the rites of passage connected to the world of work, family life and traditions of belief. In this situation, the individual is cut loose from collective frameworks and is required to treat his or her identity as a reflexive project to be constructed and maintained under

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[15] There is a significant debate about the structure of mass self-communication. Differing terms—"hives," "crowds," "swarms"—denote different social relationships occurring within a temporally and geographically displaced series of consumers (Kozinets, Hemetsberger, & Schau, 2008). In my view, public responses tend to be funneled by the first choosers or influencers of a desired good—a usage that suggests herding (Borch, 2007). In celebrity culture, the first choosers are the celebrities themselves, or at least they aspire to be, and the achievement of this status is insinuated by the term "iconic."

conditions of uncertainty and risk. Identity becomes "liquid," subsisting in a state of chronic contingency in which change seems endemic and cognitive or moral certainties are either ineffective or lacking (Bauman & Lyon, 2013). For some, the loosening of ties to oppressive categories such as class, race, and gender can be experienced as liberation. But this is accomplished through a new level of control associated with the subindividual ("dividual") parceling-out of dispositions and affect (Deleuze, 1992). The rise of social media, permitting data mining and consumer profiling through algorithms, is key to this fragmentation of the individual into abstract bundles of affect, a process whereby, at work or at leisure, the invisible hand of the market cherry-picks the affective qualities that enable the individual to sustain an engagement with others similarly abstracted (Andrejevic, 2005).

So, for example, as a user seeking online relationships with others, the individual is required by algorithms to "groom" the self to conform to the verbal and visual profile set by the application or the platform. The resultant "identity" is then positioned as a competitive self-marketing tool for the "purchase" or monetization of intimacy with "compatible" others according to the scripture of psychological personality testing. Social media, promising unlimited possibilities for sociability, work to empty the search for relationships of the affective and bodily resources that would make it meaningful and authentic (Illouz, 2007). In this scenario, the process of self-branding gives way to a process of competitive self-imaging that renders the self as a speculative bid for intimacy that mirrors the role of the buyer or seller commodity exchange (Hearn, 2008). Iconae are market-proven "dividuals," effecting a synecdochic reduction of identity to personal qualities—looks and dispositions—without losing the status of unique and replete personalities (Cashmore, 2010). By contrast, the ordinary user is only socially and collectively recognized by being subjected to reductive personalization, becoming— through data mining and algorithms—a fractional and replaceable element of an aggregate consumer profile.

Physiocratic Inequality

The emphasis on self-mastery and self-cultivation promoted by Iconae seems to advance the discipline of self-care against top-down processes of governmentality (Foucault, 1986). If the primary injunction associated with disciplinarity was "do this" or "be that," then deep mediatization requires the user to choose what she or he wants to be from a global assemblage of practices. Such practices comprise a balkanized series of fractal panopticons, each containing its own norms and standards of excellence and behavioral prescriptions concerning the use of the body as a source of accumulation (De Angelis, 2001). Seen from the perspective of an individual in search of a useable identity, the Iconae provide a smorgasbord of identity options, which threaten to turn the search for an efficacious image into a chaotic multiphrenic experience (Gergen, 1991).

These developments rest on a capillary level of social order that is not captured by Habermas's term "refeudalization." The latter suggests the retrenchment of the right to represent to individuals from an elite social background. By contrast, the Iconae are achievers, who must keep on achieving market success to have authority and influence. Neither do the Iconae fit easily with the concept of neoliberal meritocracy, where talent plus effort determines the individual right to be unequal (Littler, 2017). For the Iconae it is not talents—which may be mediocre and routine or, if great, adjacent to their popular standing—but the degree of attractiveness that they bring to the labor of performance. Looking good

on- and off-screen is the distinguishing entry qualification to a new physiocracy, the rule of those possessing well-cultivated bodily assets.[16]

The Iconae, as exemplary and resource-rich cool hunters, demonstrate that success depends on a tournament of interpersonal attraction: a status struggle that sustains and glamourizes personalized hierarchies as found, for example, in high school cliques (Collins, 2000; Kurzman et al., 2007). On one side is a contingent relationship to fame that depends on the vagaries and fluctuations of market demand. On the other, as evidenced in the replenishing rituals of celebrity—such as award shows, society events, and fashion shows—are attempts to sustain the space of celebrity as a professional enclave, materially closed to all but the current members of the A-list (Currid-Halkett, 2010. Thus is produced a form of life that veers uncertainly between the expression of aspirations of the subaltern and branding of these aspirations as a property owned by the relevant icon (Radin, 1982).

In general terms, the Iconae represent the use of the body as an accumulation strategy (Harvey, 1998). Such a strategy stresses the importance of appearance over background and turns the body into a resource to be cultivated and tamed (Juvin, 2010). Digital media are central to this process, constituting a realm par excellence where appearance counts and is held accountable. With varying intensity, users judge themselves and others in terms of their appearance or, particularly among younger users, as sexualized bodies (Van den Abeele, Campbell, Eggermont, & Roe, 2014). The algorithms framing digital interaction instigate a process of coercive superficiality, recalling the argument that surface manifestations are the experiential endpoint of the exercise of power (Kracauer, 1995).

The evocation of Iconae ensures that the division between the ordinary and the extraordinary is reasserted in a context where the chance of everyone having "15 minutes of fame" seems plausible. For every celebrity, there is a cohort of rivals, microcelebrities and celetoids, representing niches of social and economic inequality, each with its own hubs and cliques of admiration. Through this complex field of practice, the law of hierarchy pervades ways of being in public as a quotient of the fitness, or the willingness to accept the burden of striving against the limitations, of the body. Merit in this scheme is looks plus the determination to succeed. In this physiognomic zone, there occurs a Foucauldian reversal: the body becomes the prison of the soul (Foucault, 2012).

Two consequences are pertinent. Confronted with the injunction to be what they can be, ordinary users discover a menu of widely circulated made-to-measure, professionally produced identities that—thanks to cool hunting, profiling, and data-mining—anticipate and codify current and emerging trends. This process forecloses the opportunities to "play" with decentered plural identities, because only those successfully marketed have existential traction (Van Zoonen, 2013). Second, because online platforms offer opportunities for self-promotion—Facebook pages, blogs, and vlogs—hitherto anonymous individuals can aspire, however long the odds, to become icons themselves, asserting a personal superiority in saying, doing, or showing what their peers might have posted were they as prescient and capable (Marwick, 2015).

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[16] No mistake: The capacity to improve on nature is related to the resources of money and leisure to "cultivate" the genetic and psychological resources of the self and socioeconomic factors such as personal wealth or wealthy patronage (Daloz, 2010, p. 88ff).

It remains the case that those who cannot (or have no desire to) conform to the demands of White heterosexual normativity risk public disapproval and shaming as the opportunity cost for media visibility (Gamson, 1998). The digital intertwining of online and off-line media affords new opportunities to be reckoned as valuable, but also imposes new burdens of exemplary conformity to the relevant stereotype, as a platonic tax on self-identity. What emerges is a photogenic or mediagenic form of elitism determined by the body as genetic stock and, given that no body is perfect, supplemented by the will to supersede its limits to be famous.

As one of the most "iconic" of the Iconae has said:

> I believe that everyone can do what I'm doing. . . . Everyone can access the parts of themselves that are great. I'm just a girl from New York City who decided to do this, after all. Rule the world! What's life worth living if you don't rule it?" (Grigoriadis, 2010, p. 7)

There may be talent in abundance, but what counts is the will to succeed. As Lady Gaga observed of Kurt Cobain: "He just didn't want to be famous" (Seabrook, 2014).

Gods From the Sunken Place[17]

In preserving their brands as marketable commodities, Iconae valorize eponymous personalization. Evoking Foucault's concept of the care of the self, they are in fact the agents of corporate pay-per-view recipes of how to care for a mediated self-image. Undeniably, their nostrums for improving the self's psychological and corporeal qualities have an affirmative dimension—assuming that the recipes actually work. Contemporary fame calls for a deep mobilization of psychological and physical resources to enact a preemptive concretization. This process is an act of representation secured through reification, a conjuring of a marketable essence. Kanye West may be a "monster" of egotism, but he essentializes the Black male's assertion of pride against a history of oppression and symbolic annihilation. Yet admirers of his stance must wait on his willingness "to come back soon to use his power to talk back against the racial violence against people of colour" (Calafel, 2015, p. 115). Pride in a denigrated category is positive, but the dependency implicit in "waiting" speaks to the hegemony of the icon, for the collective resources that make them possible can only be mobilized through the deployment of their current persona—a symbolic resource obedient to marketing opportunities. Herein recognition becomes subjection to the logic of marketable self-presentation (Gray, 2013).

Marcuse saw the pervasive effect of commodification as repressive desublimation, the loss of a dimension of transcendence (Marcuse, 1972). The Iconae are those who, benefitting from the practices of publicity and promotion, transcend the limits of their individual talent, exploiting collective resources—techniques, dreams, and experiences—to construct a unique persona. As a result, subaltern experiences rarely enter public screens without conforming to, or being judged wanting of, the standards of self-presentation exemplified by figures such as Kim Kardashian, the Queen of the Selfie.[18] Becoming

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[17] As suggested by the meme Lost Kanye in the sunken place. See
http://www.vulture.com/2018/02/making-get-out-jordan-peele.html

iconic is the performance of a paradox, of being in a condition of exemplary ordinariness. In this process, the representation of popular experience is subjected to the disciplines of repressive resublimation.

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[18] Imitation does not imply an absence of self-affirmation, just its referential containment. The follower may seek to "outperform" a chosen icon, as in booty-shot selfies, or claim the prestige of "owning a look."

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