2.2
Celebrity Photos and Stolen Moments

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Let us take, as a point of entry, an image of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, lying atop a yacht off the coast of the Italian island of Ischia in June 1962 (Fig. 2.2a). Taken by the paparazzo Marcello Geppetti during a pause in the filming of *Cleopatra*, the photograph is exemplary of the work of the Italian paparazzi in their heyday. This purloined moment exposes a private indiscretion, capturing a scene of physical intimacy between two figures who were married to other people at the time. By offering a revelation of a hidden, scandalous truth, the image was news of the most sensational variety, featured in newspapers and magazines around the world. Despite that fact, it might reasonably be asked: what kind of news picture is this, exactly?

In her influential study *Photography and Society*, Gisèle Freund addressed this question in a chapter revealingly entitled, "The Scandal-Mongering Press." Periodicals trading in such scandal, she wrote:

> feed millions of readers, mostly women, with stories about the love affairs and intimate lives of famous and rich people, allowing them to dream of escaping the mediocrity of their own everyday existence. Scandal sheets also serve as an outlet for the reader's frustration with life's problems and her envy of those with better luck, for while readers want to daydream about the lives of celebrities, they also want to be privy to every bit of dirt.[1]

In paparazzi photography, and the periodicals that reproduced it, Freund identified a deep fascination with accessing the lives of others; a longing to bear witness to human interactions, no matter how fabulous or degraded. She suggested, in other words, that celebrity photojournalism of this type is rooted in a desire to see how the other half lives. We are accustomed to thinking about this impulse from the opposing direction, as an elite practice of investigating the lives of the less fortunate, most vividly expressed in Jacob Riis's photography of the New York slums from which the phrase derives.[2] By focusing on this element of the popular media, however, Freund reveals how photojournalism serves as a point of access to the lives of those at the top of the social hierarchy, and can work to bring them into closer contact with ordinary people, if only virtually.

Figure 2.2a Marcello Geppetti, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton at Ischia, 1962. Photos Marcello Geppetti © Marcello Geppetti Media Company Ltd.

Freund's is a rare example of the inclusion of celebrity photojournalism within a broader study of news photography. Even scholars who have analyzed paparazzi photography have tended to focus more on its relationship to ideas about celebrity than to the history of photographic news reporting.[3] As Freund's analysis indicates, this bias against celebrity photojournalism is animated by a sense that such imagery is frivolous, that it is mere escapism, and, at its worst, invasive and inhumane. The insults hurled at the producers of these images are manifold and enduring, and have worked to make the paparazzo less a real person than a projection of fears and anxieties.

Celebrities, as figures of public interest, have been the most reliable and consistent subjects for press photographers, long before the term "paparazzi" was even coined. It might be argued that celebrity culture itself emerged alongside, and in large part because of, the rise of photojournalism.[4] Celebrity is an effect of mass visual media, and the press photographer and celebrity culture share a long and complex history that has only barely begun to be explored in any depth.

This essay examines a particular mode of celebrity photography (exemplified by the paparazzi) in order to identify one of the fundamental elements of photojournalistic practice: the desire to communicate, through photographic images, information about the activities and intimate lives of other people. It is a simple, but significant, point. What unites the paparazzi and Jacob Riis, photographs of war and documentary images of daily life, is the desire to see people in new and revealing ways. In the process, photojournalism works to diminish psychological boundaries between disparate social groups.

The rhetoric of the stolen image

The roots of the photographic methods utilized by the paparazzi run deep in the history of photography. Parallel practices can be found in the mid-Victorian attempts to photograph the royal families of Europe, as well as the late nineteenth-century snapshot photographers who came to be referred to as "camera fiends" due to their intrusive practices.[5] The "documentary impulse" that film historian Tom Gunning has identified in Victorian hidden camera photography has played a crucial role in the history of photojournalistic practice.[6]

The emergence of the candid press snapshot in the years around 1900, in capital cities across Europe and America, represented perhaps the most significant reconfiguration of how popular audiences consumed images of famous people. The instantaneous press photograph—often acquired without the consent or approval of the subject—created a mode of rapidly produced portraiture that challenged conventional ideas about what constituted "good" and "bad" likenesses. While various compromises were struck between photographers and celebrities—most notably, the semi-formal "photo-op" image— it is the image acquired against the wishes of the subject, which significantly departed from established conventions, that is analyzed here.[7]

The popularity of photographs of people caught off-guard was rooted in a desire to see beyond the flattery and idealizations of the "mask" of portraiture. Writing in 1914, one advocate of the press snapshot suggested, "Rarely is the snapshot marred by that self-consciousness—or camera consciousness— which spoils the portrait. The constraint of a pose disguises the real man: the snapshot catches those elusive characteristics which reveal him."[8] Of course, this claim to truthfulness was its own aesthetic conceit, and such images were not any more "real" than their studio counterparts, but they relied upon the belief that the spontaneous, unsolicited image revealed something essential about the subject.

The two decades following World War I marked a high point in a broader popular discussion about the role of the so-called "candid camera" photographer, exemplified by the hidden camera work of Erich Salomon, discussed by Daniel Magilow in this volume.[9] The development of roll film cameras, telephoto lenses, and camera-mounted flashbulbs brought photographers into closer, less conspicuous contact with their subjects.

As Freund and others have argued, the photographic philosophy animating Salomon's practice was taken to its logical extreme in the work of the paparazzi photographers who emerged in 1950s Rome. Figures such as Geppetti and Tazio Secchiaroli developed an aggressive and confrontational photographic style, made famous by Federico Fellini in his satire of Roman high society, *La Dolce Vita*, from which the name "paparazzi" derives.[10] Photographing actors who came to Rome to shoot in the city's fabled film studios, the paparazzi were partly an effect of the decline of the Hollywood studios that guaranteed film stars protection from unwanted publicity. Critic Allan Sekula influentially argued that the paparazzi, "pose the theory of the higher truth of the stolen image," and act as "the antagonist and ethical better of the official portrait photographer."[11] In other words, the paparazzi assaulted the image of celebrity depicted in the Hollywood studio portrait.

Undoubtedly the most famous paparazzo to emerge in the 1960s and 1970s was Ron Galella—the self-styled "Paparazzo Extraordinaire." In what was by then a common photojournalistic refrain, Galella wrote, "I'm not interested in the packaged image, the sort of posed, retouched glossy favored by the official and unofficial corps of press agents . . . I am interested in printing onto film what is real . . . I want to reveal the [person's] essence."[12] For Galella, as with Salomon before him, and the Victorian hidden

camera photographers before him, a primary goal of successful photographic news reporting was to find new and challenging ways of witnessing the lives of others.

The tabloids and the stolen image

The tabloids are the most common form of the "scandal-mongering press" that Freund used to frame her discussion of the paparazzi, and are key to understanding the informational logic of the stolen celebrity photograph. Less a coherent genre of clearly identifiable periodicals than a set of discursive and representational practices, the tabloids are typically seen to include sensationalistic daily and Sunday newspapers as well as glossy weeklies featuring images of and stories about celebrities.[13]

The tabloids are central to the origins and history of photojournalism. Since the London *Daily Mirror* became the world's first newspaper to reproduce only photographic images in 1904—eschewing engraved illustrations as an inferior form of reportage—the tabloids have been at the forefront of adopting new photographic and image reproduction technologies. The *Daily Mirror*, and the many newspapers that it inspired in England such as the *Daily Sketch* and the *Daily Graphic* and later in America, the New York *Daily News*, helped consolidate a form of tabloid journalism that proved influential and durable. As scholars such as V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West have shown, the tabloids' characteristic emphasis on crime, sex, and celebrity—mixed with a firm commitment to the photographic image—reached maturity by the interwar period on both sides of the Atlantic.[14] Through an editorial commitment to reproducing provocative images that could shock and titillate mass audiences, the tabloids would be one of the most fruitful sites for the development of a commitment to the stolen celebrity image.

Take, as a salient example, a photograph depicting a shirtless King Edward VIII and his married lover Wallis Simpson sitting, like Taylor and Burton so many years later, in a boat in a state of casual repose (Fig. 2.2b). Edward embodied the transformation of the British royals into celebrities in a modern
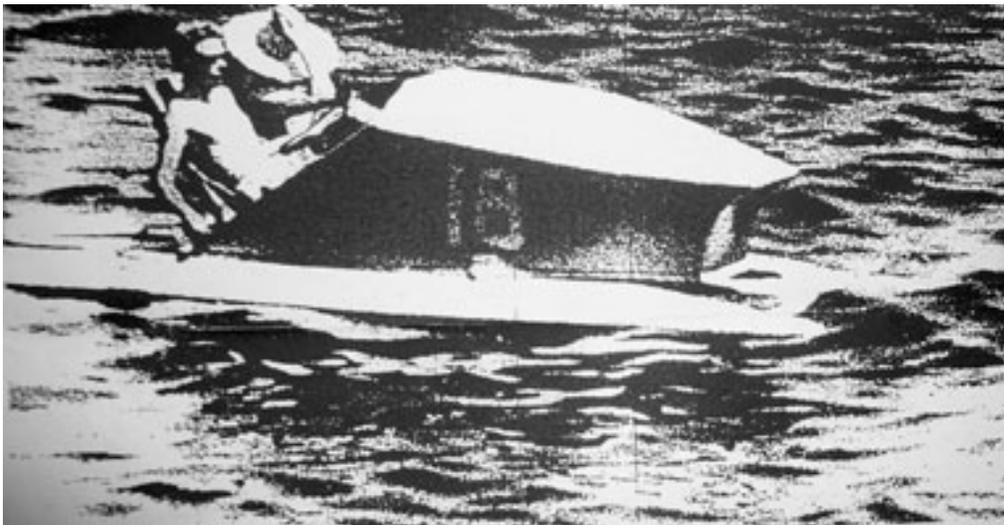

Figure 2.2b King Edward VIII and Wallis Simpson, *Sunday Graphic*, 6 December 1936.

sense, and nowhere was this more evident than in the press coverage of his affair with Simpson.[15] I will focus here on one photograph which crystallizes a particular form of stolen image-making that found fertile ground in the tabloid press, and would later be taken up and further popularized by the paparazzi.

The photograph was taken in the late summer of 1936, when the King invited Simpson and several close friends to join him on a holiday aboard the yacht *Nahlin*. Stanley Devon, the photographer responsible for the image, had been ordered by his editor at the *Daily Sketch* to stalk the couple and bring back any usable photographs of the two together. In his autobiography, Devon excitedly relayed the story of its acquisition. In a bold and inventive move, he circled the couple in a propeller plane that he had chartered, leaning out of an open side door with a magnifying camera lens. When the couple ventured from the yachting party for an intimate excursion, Devon engaged in what resembled a military assault: "We did three low-level attacks on the world's most powerful reigning monarch. I took a picture on each."[16] The tabloids, starting with the *Daily Sketch* and quickly followed by its competitors, liberally reproduced the results of this photographic "attack" once the news of the affair had broken.

Hurried and rough, the image shows signs of the stress of its making: blurry, distorted, and retouched to accentuate the hazy figures caught on camera. In its frantic lack of focus and compositional clarity, the image evinces a quality that would come to define tabloid photographs of celebrities in the next half century. Karin Becker has astutely argued that, "Technical 'flaws' like extreme graininess and underexposure have actually become conventions of the tabloids' style, visually stating the technical compromises the newspaper will accept in its commitment to presenting the 'real' story."[17] The most successful tabloid images, in other words, are not those with the most artful compositions, but rather, those that expressly eschew careful and mannered image-making. Precisely *because* they were so garbled, in other words, Devon's photographs of the King and Simpson express a firm commitment to seeing the "real" King—warts and all.

In what may appear now as a rather innocuous photographic cliché, the image was remarkably, even scandalously, novel when it was taken. It was the first photograph in history to exhibit the unclothed body of a British monarch for a mass audience. Going to great lengths—manning an air assault—was prurience, for sure, but it was also evidence of a dedication to eroding the defensive layers that had accumulated to protect the royal image.

In this way, the tabloids have long advocated a form of photojournalism that is powerfully iconoclastic. By capturing an unsolicited moment of physical intimacy and bodily proximity with his lover, the photograph proclaimed Edward's willful disregard for the Windsor tradition of respectable bourgeois rule, and its corresponding iconography. The photograph gives the lie to the King's image as an irreproachable demigod, wrapped in his ermines, robes, and regalia. To see the King engaging in a sensual act of mutual semi-nakedness with a married woman, is to see an aspect of royal life that is prohibited in traditional forms of royal portraiture, and in the sanctioned "photo-op" images that filled (and still fill) the tabloids. The royal body had never looked quite like this.

Such images would become part of a new iconography of fame: an iconography of the stolen image. Like the image of Taylor and Burton that began this essay, this photograph expresses a tendency that stretches deep into the history of photojournalism, especially in the "scandal-mongering press." Geppetti's stolen snapshots of a famous couple atop a boat in the Mediterranean are the successors— aesthetically and philosophically—of the practices pioneered by Devon and his contemporaries in pursuit of the King and Simpson atop their own boat in the Mediterranean thirty years before. While the technologies change and evolve, the underlying impulse is the same. Such images exemplify the tabloids'

commitment to a mode of photojournalism animated by an attempt to sabotage the face of celebrity in order to reveal the fallible, human, core beneath.

As scholars and practitioners of photojournalism have contended, the goal of photojournalism is to capture "things as they are."[18] The animating impulse behind news photography, according to this logic, is to offer a way of apprehending the undoctored truth. It is exactly this impulse that underlies the mode of celebrity photojournalism identified most closely with the tabloids and seen in the work of the paparazzi and their forerunners.

By assailing common standards of photographic etiquette, this form of celebrity photojournalism also assails the boundaries that keep the social elite at a remove from ordinary people. It is not only that such images show that celebrities are "just like us"—they also attempt to show that revered figures may indeed be much worse. While much of the history of photojournalism has focused on photographers who bring invisible social actors at the bottom of the social hierarchy into closer view for middle and upper class audiences, in an effort to ennoble and dignify their subjects, the paparazzi enact the opposite social transaction. This is a kind of seeing animated not by the desire to elevate the ordinary, but to depose the so-called extraordinary.

Focusing on instances of photographic "theft" helps to explain how celebrity functions as a social mechanism, and how celebrity culture's inherent contradictions are rooted in the qualities and capabilities of photojournalism. By definition, celebrity is an ambivalent social phenomenon, defined as much by opprobrium as by acclaim. If celebrity is "democratized fame," it is largely *because* of photojournalism. Photojournalism plays an inseparable role in making celebrities, but also works to drag them into a court of public opinion; it is at once a condition of celebrity and a consequence of it.

Notes

1 Gisèle Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: Godine Press, 1980): 181–2.

2 See Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1890).

3 See in particular Peter Howe, *Paparazzi and Our Obsession with Celebrity* (New York: Artisan, 2005).

4 For studies of the origins of celebrity culture, see Leo Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also Eva Giloi and Edward Berenson, eds., *Constructing Charisma: Celebrity, Fame, and Power in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010).

5 See, for example, John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert E. Mensel, " 'Kodakers Lying in Wait': Amateur Photography and the Right of Privacy in New York, 1885–1915," *American Quarterly* XLIII (March 1991): 24–45.

6 Tom Gunning, "Embarrassing Evidence: The Detective Camera and the Documentary Impulse," in J. Gaines and M. Renov, eds., *Collecting Visible Evidence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

7 See Nicholas Hiley, "The Candid Camera of the Edwardian Tabloids," *History Today* 43 (August 1993): 16.

8 *Sell's World's Press: The Handbook for the Fourth Estate* (London: H.W. Peet, 1914): 38–9.

9 See also Freund, *Photography and Society* (Boston: Godine Press, 1980): 115–40.

10 See Karen Pinkus, *The Montesi Scandal: The Death of Wilma Montesi and the Birth of the Paparazzi in Fellini's Rome* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Francesca Taroni, *Paparazzi: The Early Years* (Paris: Assouline, 1998): 5; Squiers, "Class Struggle: The Invention of Paparazzi Photography and the Death of Diana, Princess of Wales," in Squiers, ed., *Overexposed: Essays on Contemporary Photography* (New York:

The New Press, 1999). See also Vanessa Schwartz, "Wide Angle at the Beach: The Origins of the Paparazzi and the Cannes Film Festival," *Études photographiques* 26 (November 2010): 161.

11 Allan Sekula, "Paparazzi Notes," in *Photography against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984): 29.

12 Ron Galella, *Off-Guard: Beautiful People Unveiled before the Camera Lens* (New York: Greenwich House, 1983): 5.

13 See Colin Sparks and John Tulloch, eds., *Tabloid Tales* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Pub Inc, 2000).

14 V. Penelope Pelizzon and Nancy M. West, *Tabloid, Inc.: Crimes, Newspapers, and Narratives* (Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2010). See also Ryan Linkof, "The Public Eye: Celebrity and Photojournalism in the Making of the British Tabloids, 1904–1938" (Doctoral Dissertation: University of Southern California, 2011).

15 See Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Clark Gable *versus* the Prince of Wales: Anglophone Celebrity and Citizenship between the Wars," *Cultural and Social History* 4 (December 2007): 529–43. See also Ryan Linkof, " 'The photographic attack on His Royal Highness': The Prince of Wales, Wallis Simpson, and the Pre-History of the Paparazzi," *Photography and Culture* (November 2011): 277–92.

16 Stanley Devon, *Glorious: The Life-Story of Stanley Devon* (London: George C. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1957): 102.

17 Karin Becker, "Photojournalism and the Tabloid Press," in Peter Dahlgren, ed., *Journalism and Popular Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992): 143.

18 See Christian Caujoulle and Mary Panzer, *Things as They Are: Photojournalism in Context since 1955* (New York: Aperture, 2007).