

Occupy Wall Street:
A Case Study of Democratic Celebrity Dissent Rhetoric

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The re-visioning of human communicative systems toward the inclusion of progressive and cooperative effects has long been the focus of scholars from a variety of disciplines. The purpose here is to contribute to the understanding of a communication of social change. In this paper, I will examine a potential new form of persuasive dissent found in the Occupy Wall Street Movement. With the advent of the twenty-first century has come an opportunity for a celebrity dissent with thousands of faces rather than one due to Facebook, Twitter, etc. that work with more traditional forms of communication such as mass protests. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org Website: http://www.transformativestudies.org ©2012 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.*]

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Rhetorical analysis has the potential to address some of the problems of the elements and conditions of contemporary peace and social justice. Critics who study rhetoric can contribute to our understanding of what “works” in communication and is effective. The implications are clear that when applied to situations where issues of peace, justice, and equality, are at stake, the critique of rhetorical strategies used can lead to

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a better understanding of how people can learn to achieve these goals. The re-visioning of human communicative systems toward the inclusion of progressive, cooperative, and peaceful effects has long been the focus of scholars from a variety of disciplines. The purpose here is to contribute to the understanding of a language of social change. While trying to develop a comprehensive peace and social justice discourse theory, I have been researching and writing about the rhetoric of social change for some time. My aim has been to discover persuasive rhetorical frames, metaphors, symbols, linguistic strategies, or verbal paradigms that may be successfully employed by individuals advocating a shift in social attitudes about social issues. In this paper, I will examine a potential new form of persuasive dissent found in the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

Recently, I have been studying ways a celebrity persona can be utilized by dissent communicators. My interest in this came about from my research of the dissent communication of Mavis Leno. I interviewed Leno on three separate occasions about her work as chair of the *Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan*.¹ In her first interview, she explained to me how she became involved in dissent. She had been a lifelong feminist, but because of her shy and private personality had worked behind the scenes to effect social change. But when she began to read about the horrible plight of women in Afghanistan (Leno reads approximately ten books per week), she believed her time had come to lead rather than follow. She realized the potential usefulness of the persuasive referential power of her husband's (Jay Leno, *The Tonight Show* host) celebrity persona. She explained to me in one interview:

It took a long time for me to stop focusing on what I felt I was inadequate at, which when I began the traditional thing to do something about a human rights abuse would be to go to get money in the form of grants and to go to the serious press; get the issue into *Time*, blah, blah, blah...But I think that it is not uncommon for women to focus on what they don't know rather than what they do know because that is exactly what I was doing. And one day, the dime dropped, I realized, 'Wait a minute, I don't know anything about these things, but I do know everything about how you make something famous in Hollywood.'²

She realized that the potential persuasive influence she had available to her as a feminist social activist, was to utilize celebrity power to

communicate her message. She also stated that if she was giving advice to anyone with a social justice message, she would tell them to not waste time going to the serious press, but go directly to the popular press to communicate their message. Understanding celebrity as a genre of self-presentation, particularly in the visual media, is commonplace today. Viewing celebrity as a cultural formation that creates a social function in our society is also common in critical practice. It is certainly no surprise then, given the importance of the visual persona of the individual in media contexts, strategies used to create a sports or entertainment star are much the same as those employed to create a political “star,” or more important here, to create a dissent “star.”

With the advent of the twenty-first century has come an opportunity celebrity dissent with thousands of faces rather than one due to Facebook, Twitter, etc. that work in conjunction with more traditional forms of communication such as mass protests. The nature of this celebrity is based on distributed power provided by the mediums. One example of this in recent history is the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS). According to Douglas Rushkoff, a commentator, “We are witnessing America’s first true Internet-era movement, which –unlike civil rights protests, labor marches, or even the Obama campaign – does not take its cue from a charismatic leader, express itself in bumper-sticker-length goals and understand itself as having a particular endpoint.”³

OWS first came together by making connections on the internet by the Canadian activist group Adbusters and has led to Occupy movements and protests around the world. It all started when Micah White, Adbusters senior editor and Kalle Lasn, founder of the Canadian-based Adbusters Media Foundation started email conversations sharing their idea to start an occupation of lower Manhattan in early June 2011. Lasn began the *OccupyWallStreet.org* web page on June 9th, 2011, and on July 13 of the same year, in a blog post, proposed a “peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest corporate influence on democracy, the lack of legal consequences for those who brought about the global crisis of monetary insolvency, and an increasing disparity in wealth.”⁴

This movement is based on the premise that there is no one “heroic” leader or spokesperson speaking for the entire group. OWS is tightly organized but committed to “direct democracy” and avoiding authoritarian structures and institutions.⁵ Of course, OWS is not original in this way of structuring itself, there are other examples of feminist movements and alter-globalization movements that have done this in the past. But what is particularly interesting here, is that while there is no

one individual that represents them all, there is a kind of celebrity ethos present in the group communication constructed. This is rather ironic given the distance OWS has tried to create with mainstream celebrities. For example, when Miley Cyrus made a music video of herself promoting OWS, she was criticized for her “all talk” stance and lack of direct participation.⁶ When Jay-Z made t-shirts emblazoned with “Occupy Wall Street,” he was criticized for not donating the proceeds to OWS and one OWS protestor was quoted saying, “He has the political sensitivity of a hood rat.”⁷ And there was some criticism when Tom Hutton and Jerry Greenfield, founders of Tom and Jerry’s Ice Cream committed a large amount of money to fund the group.⁸ Nevertheless, OWS is an example itself of a democratic celebrity dissent rhetoric created, maintained, (and perhaps destroyed – time will tell) by an American audience. In fact, instead of being “destroyed by an American public, the movement may just fade into the sunset, because a year later, at this point, it has decreased in numbers and interest.”⁹

CELEBRITY DEFINITIONS

There are various and numerous definitions attributed to celebrity. Some researchers make a distinction between “good” and “bad” fame. “The word fame originally meant ‘good reputation’, hence the association of the great and glorious.”¹⁰ Great works, talents, and ideas characterize this kind of celebrity or hero. Leo Braudy complains about what he describes as “fame of the moment” brought about by “immediate communication” and the value of performance brought about by the mass media visual culture of the 20th century.¹¹ Daniel Boorstin states that, “The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. His qualities-or rather his lack of qualities-illustrate our peculiar problems. He is neither good nor bad, great nor petty. He is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness”.¹² There is a lot of research that focuses on celebrity as “media production” and housed within the twentieth century because of its link to visual media.¹³ Another definition that has wide currency is: “The word ‘celebrity’ refers to those people who, via mass media, enjoy ‘a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch’”.¹⁴

Ultimately, there can be no single definition of celebrity because of its connection to

time and place. Braudy maintains, “Fame is metamorphic...There can be no single perspective, no secret key by which to unlock what it really is.”¹⁵ For this reason, a celebrity persona can potentially work very well with dissent rhetoric because dissent is always time bound, uniquely contextual and requires a diverse and flexible persuasive message.

CELEBRITY HISTORY

The study of fame has a long and rich history. But it wasn't until the 1970's that the study (especially in film studies), became more widespread. This is when the examination of celebrity as a mass production really began in earnest. Braudy's *The Frenzy of the Renown* provided the most comprehensive and definitive history of celebrity.¹⁶

There are two main types of celebrity which are aristocratic fame and democratic fame.¹⁷ Aristocratic fame belonged to the religious and political elites who had “the power to control their audiences and their images”.¹⁸ Once mass media was developed, a new kind of celebrity became available in the form of democratic fame. This allowed for the potential for more identification between audience and celebrity. The audience could participate in the creation, maintenance, and destruction of the celebrity (and in some cases rebirth). The distinction between an aristocratic fame and a democratic fame is an important one for dissent groups. Clearly, a democratic fame is worth pursuing for groups who want to tap into the empowerment of an audience, particularly at the grassroots level. OWS is an example of a dissent group that has (so far) appropriated a democratic fame successfully.

According to Rojek the idea of celebrity came about because of three related historical occurrences. He writes, “First, the democratization of society; second, the decline in organized religion; third, the commodification of everyday life.”¹⁹ Celebrity is secular society's response to the decline of magic and religion. Rojek states that celebrity is a mass desire, a cult worship. Celebrity culture in the form of capitalism continually creates and mobilizes desire within the audience and yet never fulfills it completely. To do so, would bring its power to an end. Rojek states, “Capitalism can never permit desire to be fulfilled, since to do so will neutralize desire and thus, forfeit economic growth.”²⁰ This desire and consumption of commodities strengthens the division between having and desiring in the consumer.

The interesting paradox of democracy is that it provides a context for the celebrity that is “safe” for the audience because the celebrity is a part of the consumer system, the status quo, yet at the same time, the celebrity

represents freedom and equality to do and say what they want that is so very attractive to the audience. The celebrity has the ability to attack the powerful elite within the system they themselves embody. In addition, as Rojek explains, “Achieved celebrities frequently hail from poor backgrounds, but their achievements drive a wedge between themselves and their audience. Thus, even in toasting the achievements of celebrities, fans are sharply conscious of the gulf between the staged life before them and their own bounded circumstances.”²¹ This identification with the celebrity and yet division at the same time, further supports the having and wanting within the audience. Tuner, Bonner and Marshall explain very well, “Celebrities are brand names as well as cultural icons or identities; they operate as marketing tools as well as sites where the agency of the audience is clearly evident; and they represent the achievement of individualism – the triumph of the human and the familiar – as well as its commodification and commercialization.”²²

The power of the celebrity is with the people rather than any institution. Celebrities are representative actors in the social domain. They are “proxies of change.”²³ One such OWS example is “We are the 99%, This is not right!” The group does not rely on statistics and facts for this. The statement itself carries weight and persuasive drama. Public opinion polls show that most Americans believe corporations have too much economic and political power. A Gallup poll from September, 2011 showed that 70 percent of Americans want to increase taxes on corporations and 66 percent want to increase income tax on the top 1 percent of earners. A Gallup poll from February, 2012, found that 62 percent of Americans want less corporate influence on economic and political life.²⁴ These statistics indicate that many Americans identify with this major position of OWS.

CELEBRITY POLITICIANS

Politician as celebrity is not new and has been present at least since 1960 when John Kennedy and Richard Nixon had the first televised debate. According to Cooper Lawrence, “Nixon, naïve about TV, arrived at the studio with a five o’clock shadow, wearing an ill-fitting shirt, and twenty pounds overweight. He refused to wear makeup and as a result looked sallow, sweaty and tired on camera. Kennedy, who was on steroids for Crohn’s Disease at the time, looked tan, young, vibrant, handsome, and all made-up like a cover model using the cameras the way an actor would. Intellectually the two may have been on par, but

physically they definitely were not, and it shaped how voters saw them.”²⁵

Of course, the rise of Ronald Reagan “the actor”²⁶ combined “stagecraft and statecraft”.²⁷ Alter argues that this is the age of celebrity politics and that all politicians are celebrities, but some are good and some are bad. The likely or unlikely marriage of politics and Hollywood has become a reality in a mass mediated society. Rojek explains this political stagecraft in this way: “Staged celebrity refers to the calculated technologies and strategies of performance and self- projection designed to achieve a status of monumentality in public culture. In cases where these technologies and strategies are successful, the achieved celebrity may acquire enduring iconic significance. Because democracy assumes the formal equality of the electorate, it requires leaders to be larger than the common man, so as to achieve influence over public opinion. Political leaders, therefore, soon became adept in staging celebrity.”²⁸ In addition, Gamson postulates, “Like entertainers, politicians are coached, handled, wardrobe, made up, carefully lit.”²⁹ And Meyrowitz states that “politics is a dramatic ritual, it is ultimately impossible to separate the thread of reality from the thread of performance.”³⁰

In James Bowman’s article *Rock Star Status*, Bowman argues that Barack Obama has the potential to be the first “rock star” president.³¹ I too argued in an earlier publication Obama embodied what I called a “prophetic celebrity” presidential candidate.³² In the recent past, I have also examined how a few individual dissenters (from my own interviews and research) have embodied a celebrity persona (for a brief time in American history). I based these critiques on the idea that since celebrities are agents of change in American culture, it makes sense that not only politicians but social activists can utilize celebrity personas as well.

CELEBRITY DISSENTERS

A celebrity “performs magic” with “staged events” or spectacle.³³ Spectacle replaces the everyday routine of patterned life. Also, this spectacle leads the audience to believe that anything and everything is possible.³⁴ God is the ultimate image. Image is the building of reputation or what “appears” to be credible rather than “real” character, (how can we know whether a person has “real” character or not?). All we every really know is what we “see”. This distinction has been around as long as Aristotle and the Greeks. According to Gamson, “The private self is no longer the ultimate truth. Instead, what is most true, most real, most

trustworthy, is precisely the relentlessly performing self.”³⁵ This serves to create a kind of “mystique” around the celebrity dissenter where the audience is intrigued with the celebrity dissenter through the creation of “distance” or the “elevation from the ordinary.”³⁶ The power of the celebrity image is through being set apart and having the “appearance” of greatness through ordinariness. They represent the “best” of the audience, having come from the audience (and the audience’s power to bestow celebrity status). The celebrity has the freedom to become and do what the audience only dreams of doing. The audience is able to change themselves and the world around them when they idolize celebrities. Much like the worship of “god” which comes from an image that is constructed by individuals, and the worship in a sense of the prophet who is the “voice” of god; the celebrity is made “authentic” to the audience, by his/her set apartness, enigma or mystery, all constructed and reinforced by spectacle.

Balanced with this “distance” is “intimacy at a distance”, also created by the use of spectacle. The audience participates willingly in this transaction to create identification with the celebrity dissenter. Part of the pleasure the audience feels is the tension between idolizing the celebrity/dissenter from a distance and catching glimpses of the “real” person behind the performance. These glimpses allow the audience to experience a kind of intimacy with the celebrity. For the celebrity politician, campaigns are hyper reality “staged” to appear not just of political interest but consumer interest as well which engages the audience from this celebrity perspective.

OWS CELEBRITY DISSENT

OWS incorporates staged activity much like a celebrity does. To begin with, they staged occupation of a public space, Zuccotti Park where 2,000 people congregated and set up tents. This, to begin with, is a persuasive staging of events. The performing of “corporate zombies” parades, “Choreographed Festivities,” “Reclaim the Streets Parties”, are all examples of staged events. When Brookfield Office Properties brought fliers explaining rules banning tents and sleeping bags, the protesters made the fliers into origami. Early in the protests when the police came into the park, the protesters followed them with lights and cameras and calling their photographers “coparazzi.”

A further example includes OWS’s use of “carnival” with the human microphone (also called “people’s microphone”, present at protest gatherings. The way it works is the speaker with a message starts by

saying “mic check” and this lets the protestors know that the speaker has something to say. The speaker then pauses, and states part of a speech and then pauses again. Those in hearing range repeat what the speaker has said in unison, and when they finish, the speaker says an additional statement pauses and they continue in this way until the speech is complete. This strategy was used by Occupy Wall Street because of practical reasons, namely, that New York has regulations stopping the use of conventional megaphones. But it also provided an opportunity for spectacle.

A very interesting additional form of spectacle is the participation in “general assemblies.”³⁷ Historically, general assemblies are a very important idea of contemporary anarchist activism. This form of activism is based on the notion that “revolutionary movements relying on coercion of any kind only result in repressive societies.”³⁸ General assemblies are where groups come together and only make decisions by consensus which can be a long and difficult process. In addition, within these assemblies, the participants use a very specific sign language to ask question, show support or disagreement, and even conflict. This is such an unusual process to incorporate within a very visible movement, where the participants sleep in tents and spend a lot of time together, that it creates a kind of theatricality all its own.

All of these are demonstrations that American audiences can identify with because they are watching individuals much like themselves, set up camp and protest, but these protestors are set apart because they have the courage to participate in this way. These staged events have the “appearance” of greatness through ordinariness. They represent the “best” of the audience, having come from the audience (the protestors are like you and me). One critic wrote, “Is it a display of leadership or anarchy, revolution or Sunday in the park? And the answer is, we just don’t know yet. This is a new form of drama that is just happening to play itself out.”³⁹

In addition, the “face” of the movement is not one individual, but rather a mask that is incorporated in the “drama” of the protests much like masks have been used historically in plays and dramatic events. The Guy Fawkes mask is the face and the symbol of the movement and plays very effectively into the visual nature of the movement. According to Edward Lovett, “The Fawkes mask resembles the man only in having dark hair and a moustache. The mask adds the soul patch, rosy cheeks and charismatic-trickster look.”⁴⁰ The trickster character is a very important construct historically used in melodrama. Archetypal constructs of melodrama are widely accessible and have been integral in

Western thought since the great classical era. Dramatic structures featuring the hero-villain-victim scenario surface in the narratives of many historical cultures. One early melodrama that enjoyed great popularity during the Middle Ages has particular usefulness in understanding the function of such constructs. These folk plays featured a structure known as the combat, cure, and collection. A typical hero-villain playlet would be performed, and upon its completion a “fool” (trickster) would call for a resurrection of the fallen villain. During this “cure” episode, a “doctor” would come in and replace the head of the decapitated villain and afterward a collection would be taken. This particular format brought into full light the social function of opposition. The well-known figure of the fool served to carry disorder into the pre-established system; his role was to invert the structures of authority and subvert the status quo.⁴¹

To understand further the significance of the Guy Fawkes mask, it is important to understand where it came from. It has been romanticized over the past 400 years and used to symbolize many different things, ever since an Englishman, Guy Fawkes tried to bomb the British Parliament on November 5, 1605. However, history books did not lead to the popularity the mask has today, rather a 300-year-old comic book series and five-year-old movie (*V for Vendetta*) made it popular. Lewis Call, an assistant history professor at California Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo, explains, “The origins of this mask comes from the idea of rising up against the government, Guy Fawkes represents the fact that the people have the real power.” He goes on to state, “You can seize hold of it for any political purpose you want. That’s the real power of it.”⁴² Also, One OWS protestor, Alexandra Ricciardelli explains the symbolic value of the mask, ‘It’s not about bombing anything; it’s about being anonymous – and peaceful.’⁴³ Another protestor, Jason J. Cross explained, “The origins of this mask comes from the idea of rising up against the government, Guy Fawkes represents the fact that the people have the real power.”⁴⁴ David Lloyd, the British graphic novel artist who created the image of the mask has said, “It’s become a common brand and a convenient placard to use in protest against tyranny – and I’m happy with people using it, it seems quite unique, an icon of popular culture being used this way.”⁴⁵ The Guy Fawkes mask is then manipulated and used to symbolize a dissent movement that originated from Warner Brothers and more specifically, a graphic artist, as a popular culture icon. This symbol alone creates a “distance” and “intimacy” and comes from celebrity pop culture. The Fawkes mask creates distance by giving ambiguity or mystery to each dissenter who

wears it. It gives intimacy in that it is worn by many, creating an identification and unity among all the dissenters. Further it allows the group of individuals to subvert the status quo. The power of the celebrity, creates a tension between mystery and identification (intimacy). This is essential. This is the appeal. The audience is always seeking (but never satisfied or should not be satisfied) a glimpse of the authentic human being behind the star persona, or in this case the human beings behind the mask. This search is intriguing.

While all this staging was occurring at specific locations, it was also collaboratively occurring in a viral way via Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. For example, OWS used dramatic symbols such as showing a dancer on top of Wall Street's iconic Charging Bull Statue (As stated earlier, this was created by AdBusters when they initially posted their blog to gather protestors in New York City). Also, the group repetitively replayed dramatic events that had already occurred for the viral audience. So their power is a viral celebrity as well.

It is important to understand the important role of redemption narratives in the creation of spectacle by OWS celebrity dissenters. David Graeber explains well the need for redemption in interviews, and has written about it as well, in for example, his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, published two months before the beginning of Occupy Wall Street. David Graeber is one of the key anarchists in OWS. He is not a leader among the protestors, nor a spokesperson, but he has been described as one of the group's "most articulate voices, able to frame the movement's welter of hopes and grievances within a deeper critique of the historical movement."⁴⁶ Graeber, a 50-year-old anthropologist, who calls himself an anarchist, has been involved in global justice protests for many years. Kalle Lasn, the founder of *Adbusters*, says "He is a deep thinker. He's been a student of movements and revolutions." Further Lasn states, "He's the sort of guy who can say, 'Is this thing we're going through like 1968 or is it like the French Revolution?'"⁴⁷

Graeber explains the redemptive narrative this way. The sin Americans are faced with now is part of an ongoing story that has continued throughout history. The sin is that states control Americans by creating and sustaining debt. The states then use this debt to usually pay for wars. When enough people get into debt, there will be revolt. Young Americans are graduating from college with a huge debt, and no job prospects. Financial magnates have "stolen" their future. In addition, in general, Americans are being held hostage by huge debts from mortgages and credit-card debt. Individuals are being held accountable for their debts, but huge corporations and banks are not being held accountable

for their debts and this has been the case specifically since the financial crisis in 2008. The sin is clear, the villains (banks and corporations) identified as well as the victims (American students and unemployed) in this narrative. For redemption to occur, we must rethink the role of debt and re-negotiate its importance in our lives. Graeber states, “The sense we have that it’s important to repay debts corrupts the impulse to take care of each other. Debts are not sacred, human relationships are.”⁴⁸ Graeber explains, “Sovereignty does ultimately belong to the people, at least in theory. You gave the bank the right to make up money that is then lent to you. We collectively create this stuff, and so we could do it differently.”⁴⁹ Graeber argues for a “forgiveness” of all consumer and international debt and an agreement to “arrange things in a different way.”⁵⁰ Graeber maintains that this change can only occur when democracy really works and the people in this country decide to empower themselves to make these changes. This is the way we can be reborn into a world that is based on equality, justice, and generosity. This powerful evocative redemptive narrative works for OWS. One journalist wrote, “Though much of the mainstream media, politicians, and even some liberal journalists have dismissed the movement as radical and unfocused, Occupy Wall Street has crafted a cogent and politically viable narrative.”⁵¹ It is a redemptive narrative as well. This powerful story telling is communicated virally as well. Multimedia narratives are sent by cell phone videos and pictures that are then sent to Twitter.com, Facebook.com, YouTube.com, and Flickr.com. As recently as November, 2011, an “Occupy Wall Street” search shows that there are 88,300 videos, with many of them having more than 100,000 views.⁵²

CELEBRITY DISSENT CRITIQUE

The link between celebrity and commodification potentially may create some problems for dissenters wanting to stand against a capitalistic culture and certainly creates a paradox for them. This tension needs to be researched further and thoughtfully. Briefly, I would argue that OWS in particular, does not reflect a particularly revolutionary or radical movement, but represents mainstream Americans. One journalist wrote, “After all, how radical can a movement allegedly representing the 99 percent be?”⁵³ Perhaps it could be argued that OWS is not intending an overthrow of the entire capitalistic culture, but a re-ordering of priorities within that system. So it would not seem inappropriate for OWS to reflect the celebrity culture as part of that democratic system. In any case, it warrants further analysis.

A second criticism of politicians (and we could argue here dissent leaders and movements) embracing celebrity strategies and culture, is that it leads the political or dissent leader to utilize a method that is “artificial” and “inauthentic” because it is “performed”. These scholars argue for a reconciliation of meaning with image.⁵⁴ This then leads to a passive public that no longer thinks for themselves but only mirror or reflect what others in the celebrity culture are saying and doing. Boorstin writes, “Public opinion-once the public’s expression-becomes more and more an image into which the public fits its expression. Public opinion becomes filled with what is already there. It is the people looking in the mirror.”⁵⁵

I would argue that the celebrity is no more performed than any other self an individual portrays. Aristotle argued that it is the “appearance” of goodwill that a communicator portrays that is relevant. There is no way to know if the communicator’s personal motives are based in good will. But for the audience to be persuaded, the communicator has to perform the good will self. Communication has always been about performing selves that are appropriate for a given context. I perform various selves such as mother, friend, teacher, etc. Am I authentic when I portray these selves? I may perform them in an authentic way, an inauthentic way, or a combination of the two. In relationships, we are always trying to get glimpses of authentic selves, because this is where connection takes place. In addition, the search for authenticity in each other keeps us intrigued. The process of pursuit of what is real and vulnerable is as pleasurable and fascinating as the discovery of it. If a person has been granted or negotiated with an audience a celebrity self, then they may perform that self in an authentic or inauthentic way, depending on circumstance, timing, and who is present.

P. T. Barnum was an innovator in revealing the “stunts” performed by publicity. He became famous for stating there is a “sucker born every minute”. His “subjects were superlatives-the best, the strangest, the biggest, the only-made superlative through image management.”⁵⁶ Gamson writes, “Barnum was not simply publicly promoting the performers, however, he was publicly performing the promotion. He became an international figure for the *way* he focused attention to create fame and illusion.”⁵⁷ Further, “Shuttling his audiences between knowing the tricks and believing the illusions, Barnum brought publicity mechanisms and questions of artifice to the forefront.”⁵⁸ Rather than the “tricks” and “illusion” leading audiences to be disappointed with the discovery of the “artifice” it further engaged them because it was allowing them to participate in the creation of the celebrity from behind

the scenes. They now knew how the “tricks” were constructed and they felt more a part of the staged events. This gave the audience further power through this collaborative negotiation or as Gamson explained a kind of “ironic knowingness.”⁵⁹ So the staging, the creation of the performative self does not discourage the audience from “believing”. The audience “suspends reality” when they observe a movie or stage production. The audience chooses to suspend judgment and become engaged in the performance happening before them. This only enhances the event, it does not in any way take away from its potency or power. OWS portrays a celebrity persona that communicates a performative self that provides glimpses into their authentic selves. This holds persuasive power with their audiences not in spite of the performative self, but because of it. The audience is fully aware and participating in this staging event that is both performative and potentially authentic as well.

Finally, there are critics who say that because OWS does not have a specific message of demands, the movement will ultimately fail as many leaderless movements have failed in the past. In fact, media coverage has dropped since the encampments were dismantled. According the Project for Excellence in Journalism, in November, 2011, 15 percent of the news in the country was focused on OWS. But by February, 2012, the number was less than 1 percent.⁶⁰ Nicole Demby, a writer, critic, and activist states, “If Occupy Wall Street has failed to use this platform to limit itself to a discrete set of demands, it is because it refuses to undermine the depth and breadth of what’s wrong. OWS’s message is entangled with its form, its self-sustaining structure in which the group provides for its own physical, social and intellectual needs.”⁶¹ The protesters seem to understand that their persuasive power is not about communicating definitions of protest, but about performing narratives of protest.

Gamson has written about the complexity of the celebrity persona. He asserts, “The parallel world of entertainment celebrity so strange and familiar, so superficial yet so deeply alluring, offers the most free space of all in which to have the conversation: a world much like our own, but a world where nothing really matters.”⁶²

There is much potential in examining the links between celebrity persona and dissent rhetoric in the future, whether it is in the form of one charismatic leader or a group of individuals using a viral platform as well as traditional forms of dissent. There needs to be further study of the presence, usefulness, and dangers of a celebrity dissent persona. Therein lies the peril and the potential.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Mavis Leno, interview with author in Los Angeles, CA August 2, 2001, in Beverly Hills, CA January 15, 2004 and January 20, 2011.
- ² Mavis Leno, interview with author in Beverly Hills, CA, January 15, 2004.
- ³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall-Street
- ⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Occupy_Wall_Street
- ⁵ http://campusprogress.org/articles/why_occupy_wall_street_isnt_particularly_revolutionary/
- ⁶ <http://tmz.com/2011/11/30/occupy-wall-street-miley-cyrus-video-priscilla-grim/>
- ⁷ <http://necolebitchie.com/2011/11/12/occupy-wall-street-leader-criticizes-jay-z/>
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