

Celebrating catastrophe

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In his afterword to the new edition of *The Frenzy of Renown*, Leo Braudy astutely distinguishes between the manner in which our culture has virtually been swallowed up by the indiscriminate yet insistent presence of fame, and the manner in which fame in the ancient world was conceived as a way of honouring 'what aspired to be permanent in human action and thought, beyond death and all of life's accidents' (Braudy, 1997: 599). Addressing the question of whom a given culture designates as being famous, however, proves to be indicative of our cultural tastes as well. Indeed, given that we as individuals tend to connect stages of our personal lives with the activities of famous people, celebrity culture today takes on a global value. As Braudy explains, 'long-lived celebrity and fame have deeper roots. They represent unfinished business in the national psyche, emblems of heroism or villainy, innocence or guilt, that may last for decades, even centuries' (Braudy, 1997: 600). Now, the crucial shift he locates for our culture resides in the fact that while in earlier periods the desire for fame meant wanting to do something really memorable in relation to a long period of history, the desire today is for a more immediate, and thus also more ephemeral fame; namely for the attention of the moment, as this is made possible by television and photojournalism. This allows him to distinguish between our postmodern cultural stars and the saints of old: 'Although the urge to fame originally was the aspiration for a life after death in the

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