



Being a Celebrity: Alienation, Integrity, and the Uncanny

ABSTRACT: *A central feature of being a celebrity is experiencing a divide between one's public image and private life. By appealing to the phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, we analyze this experience as paradoxically involving both a disconnection and alienation from one's public persona and a sense of close connection with it. This 'uncanny' experience presents a psychological conflict for celebrities: they may have a public persona they feel alienated from and that is at the same time closely connected to them and shapes many of their personal interactions. We offer three ways in which a celebrity might approach this conflict: (i) eradicating the divide between their public and private selves, (ii) splitting or separating their private and public selves, or (iii) embracing the arising tension. We argue that it is only this third approach that successfully mitigates the negative effects of the alienation felt by many celebrities.*

KEYWORDS: fame, celebrity, alienation, integrity, uncanny

Introduction

Muriel Spark's novel *The Public Image* (1968) tells the story of actress Annabel Christopher's rise to fame and of her attempts to build and then maintain her public image. Together with her director and publicist, Annabel creates an image of herself as 'a suppressed tiger'—a devoted and faithful wife who is composed and conventional in public, but a wild 'tiger-woman' in private (1968: 22). As Annabel's public profile rises, this persona begins to take over her life. Meanwhile, Annabel's husband is growing envious and resentful of her success, and ends up committing suicide in a way deliberately designed to undermine his wife's public image. Annabel attempts to salvage her public image before eventually conceding defeat and attempting to start a new life away from the public eye.

One central issue that Spark's novel addresses is the relationship between a celebrity's private life and their public persona. Annabel's struggle to handle the conflict between the two eventually leads her to abandon her career as an actress. This conflict has been a key theme in both popular and academic discussions of

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the nature of celebrity and fame. In fact, this tension is so central to the experience of fame that the historian Antoine Lilti claims the divide between a celebrity's public image and private life is 'at the heart of the celebrity system' (Lilti 2017: 32), and sociologist Chris Rojek (2001: 11) claims that 'celebrity status always implies a split between a private self and a public self'.

We understand a celebrity as someone whose life is subject to high levels of public attention in ways that go beyond their specific talents, expertise, or professional role (Archer et al. 2020). People may become famous by possessing particular talents, such as being an excellent artist or fulfilling a particular role, like that of a president. However, this is not a necessary feature of celebrity. As Daniel Boorstin points out, celebrities may be simply 'well-known for their well-knownness' (1962: 57), and, as we have discussed elsewhere, celebrities are often critiqued as being famous without any connection to their great achievements or talents (Robb and Archer 2022). According to Lawrence Friedman (1999: 28), it is also possible to be famous without being a celebrity because being famous means being 'well-known', while being a celebrity involves 'high visibility'. Our focus here is on celebrities whose fame results in their lives being subject to high levels of public interest and attention.

In this paper, we analyze the complex experience of the divide between a celebrity's 'public persona' and their 'private self', and the ethical challenges that arise from this. In section 1, we outline the existing work in celebrity studies that characterizes the experience of celebrity as involving a divide between one's public and private lives. This divide causes feelings of objectification and alienation; yet, at the same time many celebrities report that they feel their public persona is closely connected to their private self. The existing literature considers Sartre's phenomenological account of the objectifying gaze of the 'other' as exemplary to characterize the celebrity experience of fame (see, for example, Morrison 2014; Howe 2020). However, in section 2 we argue that appealing to Sartre only explains one part of the tension in the relationship between a celebrity's public and private selves, focusing on the experiences of alienation and disconnection. Instead, in section 3 we use Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968) to explain more successfully the complex tension between a celebrity's public and private selves, characterizing the way in which the movement between the two involves both disconnection and connection, alienation and belonging.

This phenomenological analysis illuminates a distinct challenge facing celebrities. To mitigate the negative and alienating effects of the tension between their public persona and private life, celebrities seem forced to choose either to embrace fully or reject their public image. We argue in section 4 that both approaches are problematic insofar as they do not accurately represent the experience of being famous and potentially hinder the development of the virtue of integrity. Instead, we suggest that the most virtuous approach to the tension is to accept the conflict between the public and private self, finding ways for the two selves to interact with each other creatively and critically. We conclude by highlighting the increasing pervasiveness of fame and the way in which we are all affected by the ambiguous relationship between our public and private selves.

The first aim in this paper is to offer a phenomenological analysis of the experience of being a celebrity and to examine the challenges arising from this. Our second and more general aim is to address the surprising lack of philosophical work on the nature and value of fame and celebrity. Celebrities play a significant role in many societies, not only providing entertainment but also acting as role models and exemplars with significant influence over ethical, political, and aesthetic norms and behaviors. The importance of celebrity as a social and ethical phenomenon has resulted in the growth of ‘celebrity studies’, involving contributions from a diverse range of academic disciplines, such as sociology (Rojek 2001), cultural studies (Dyer 1979), history (Braudy 1986), and politics (Marshall 1997). However, at least in recent years, philosophy as a discipline has contributed surprisingly little to this field of study, aside from the issues of whether celebrities have duties to be good role models (Howe 2020; Spurgin 2012) and whether we should honor and admire immoral public figures (Archer and Matheson 2019, 2021). This paper is an attempt to explore the ways in which philosophy, particularly phenomenology and ethics, can add to our understanding of fame and celebrity.

1. The Experience of Being a Celebrity

Given the lack of attention that philosophers have paid to the phenomenon of celebrity in recent years, it is surprising that it is a philosopher, Jean Jacques Rousseau, who is considered by some to have been one of the first European celebrities and one of the first authors to write extensively about the experience of fame (see Lilti 2017: 17). Following the publication of his controversial *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* in 1750, Rousseau quickly became a literary celebrity across Europe and described this as burdensome and alienating (Lilti 2017: 109–59). In a 1764 draft of what would later become his *Confessions* (1995), Rousseau identifies the split between a ‘public’ and ‘private’ self as one of the consequences of being famous:

Among my contemporaries, there are few men whose names are more known in Europe and whose person is more unknown. . . . Each drew me according to his whim, without fear that the original might come to give him the lie. There was a Rousseau in high society, and another in retirement who bore no resemblance to him. (Rousseau 1995: 587)

Rousseau suggests here that his public persona is a ‘lie’ fabricated by the public, completely distinct and separated from his private ‘original’ self.

Rousseau was so concerned by this experience that he devoted one of his last manuscripts, *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues* (1990), to studying the implications of the divide between his private and public selves. Here, Rousseau makes explicit the way in which his public persona is one over which he has decreasing levels of control. He claims that the public ‘reduced’ him to his public persona, imbuing it with their own idea of traits and characteristics and even choosing a new ‘public’ name for him. This lack of control results in

disconnection and alienation; Rousseau feels isolated among his contemporaries and refers to his public self in the third person (Rousseau 1990: 5, 41–42, 128–29). Rousseau was not alone in experiencing his public persona as infiltrating the way he lived in private. For example, the American actor and film director Marlon Brando claimed that when people become a celebrity, the public ‘don’t relate to you but to the myth they think you are, and the myth is always wrong’ (Brando and Lindsey 1994: 143; this is also cited in Giles 2000: 86). According to Brando, this experience negatively affected his private life and personal relationships. While Rousseau and Brando explain their public self as being one that is forced upon them and controlled by the public, celebrities have some ability to shape this persona. As Sharon Marcus (2019) argues, the celebrity persona should be viewed as a joint construction of the public, the media, and the celebrity themselves. Moreover, the division between a private and public self has also been reported by some celebrities as being an essential coping mechanism. For example, in a qualitative study of fifteen American celebrities, Donna Rockwell and David Giles (2009) found that their subjects commonly felt the division between a public and private self was necessary to cope with the emotional pressures of fame. Some celebrities intentionally create a distinct public persona as a way of holding back their ‘authentic’ or ‘original’ self, only allowing the public to appropriate their ‘celebrity’ or ‘other’ self (Rockwell and Giles 2009: 203).

One of the main driving forces behind the disconnection between the public and private self is objectification: the transformation of the self into a commodity that can be appropriated and claimed by the public. The celebrities in Rockwell and Giles’s study reported feeling ‘owned by the public’ (2009: 203), and many celebrities have spoken out about their experience of being objectified. For example, the Irish singer Sinéad O’Connor has articulated how after becoming famous she ‘went from a person to a product’ and that even her friends and family started to treat her as a ‘famous object’ (cited in Giles 2000: 85). Similarly, Beyoncé has described the unreal and inhuman experience of becoming ‘the property of the public’ (O’Neil 2014). Creating a separate public persona can be a way to ensure that it is not the private self that is appropriated, objectified, and controlled by the public in this way.

Even though a public persona may be intentionally created as a necessary coping mechanism, many celebrities claim to feel alienated by this persona. British fashion model Kate Moss, for example, reports looking at pictures of herself during her modeling career and not recognizing the person in the pictures as really ‘her’ (Giles 2000: 87). This disassociation arises because Moss’s model ‘self’ is a public persona that is ‘alien’ and ‘other’ to her own conception of who she ‘really’ is. In some cases, alienation and disassociation will be intensified when the public persona takes over the celebrity’s private life. As Rojek (2001: 12) has described, the celebrity’s ‘original’ self is often engulfed by a public persona that feels alien to them. In these cases, a celebrity’s ‘private’ or ‘original’ self may disappear altogether because their public persona is so renowned that it is taken by others to be who the celebrity ‘really is’, while their ‘original’ self is treated by the public as ‘inauthentic’. Singer Marianne Faithfull, for instance, reports feeling intense disassociation due to the enormity of her public persona. She describes how this

persona destroyed her private self, to the extent that she felt as if her life was not her own and that she ‘was living somebody else’s’ (Faithfull 1994: 191; this is also quoted in Rojek 2001: 83).

The celebrity experience is therefore one that involves feeling disconnected, alienated, and perhaps even consumed by one’s public persona. At the same time, celebrities cannot escape the fact that they are closely and intimately connected to this persona; it is a ‘self’ that is indexed to their own personal life and their everyday activities. Because a celebrity’s public image is so well known, this dictates how others interact with them and often seeps into the celebrity’s personal life. As such, the split between the public and private self is often hard to delineate. This is highlighted by celebrities such as Brett Easton Ellis (2019: 128–30), who reports clearly that he felt as if he was living two lives, each represented by his private and public self: ‘In a sense there were now two Brets—the private and the public—and 1987 was the year I realized they coexisted, which was how unusual my life as a twenty-three-year-old celebrity seemed to me’. Although Easton Ellis’s public persona was separate and disconnected from his private self, he describes that persona as being ‘decidedly mine’—it still felt like part of his own life (Easton Ellis 2019: 128–30). British singer Lily Allen also explains feeling distanced from her public persona but at the same time connected to it: ‘I know that I am Lily Allen. . . . But I am also quite realistic in the sense that I know that she’s not me’ (Taylor 2014: 30).

This morphing of the ‘authentic self’ and ‘public persona’ is usually highlighted when things go wrong, when a celebrity’s public persona is disgraced or shamed. This was the case with Muriel Spark’s character, the actress Annabel Christopher: the humiliation of Annabel’s public image also devastates her own private life, forcing her to leave town and attempt to build an entirely new life. Similarly, in a recent documentary (Wilson 2020), Taylor Swift speaks openly about the close connection between her public and private life, exemplified by the incident at the MTV awards in 2009 in which Kanye West interrupted proceedings to publicly denounce Swift for winning the Best Female Video award. It was not only Swift’s public persona that was affected by this humiliation; she recalls her deep personal anguish and the way in which the event caused her to question who she ‘really’ wanted to be. This kind of personal experience would not be possible if the celebrity’s public and private selves were sharply split and disconnected. As such, the way in which the private self seems to be affected by the experiences of the public persona highlights the important ways in which these two ‘selves’ are connected. The experience of fame and the divide between a celebrity’s private and public selves seem to involve a paradoxical feeling of both disconnection *and* connection, disassociation *and* association, alienation *and* belonging. Any analysis of the phenomenology of fame and celebrity must be able to account for this strange dual experience.

2. Sartre’s Phenomenology and the Objectifying Gaze of the ‘Other’

In the celebrity studies literature, it is Sartre’s account of phenomenology that is used to explain and analyze the experience of disconnect between a celebrity’s private and

public lives, and the way this gives rise to feelings of alienation and inauthenticity (see, for example, Morrison 2014; Howe 2020). Although Sartre does not distinguish between a 'private' and a 'public' self, the distinction he makes between the 'self' and the objectifying gaze of the 'other' has been interpreted as providing valuable insights for why celebrities feel uneasy and estranged by their public persona.

The starting point of this analysis is Sartre's example of the waiter in *Being and Nothingness* (1958: 59–60). In this passage, Sartre explains how a waiter in a Parisian café 'plays' at being a waiter, adopting the attitude and gestures that are expected of him by the customers. Sartre claims that the public 'demands' certain behaviors from the waiter, limiting him to the sole function of being a waiter and defining the characteristics of how he should behave. In the same way, the celebrity adopts a public persona that accommodates their role of being famous. To a large extent the public control the limits and characteristics of that persona, setting the expectations that will define the behavior of the celebrity's role as a public figure. The experience of adopting a public image whose characteristics are defined by the public is not unique to waiters or to those working in public roles. We are all, to a certain extent, limited and defined by our environments and others around us, experiencing the objectifying look of the 'other' and the force of their expectations. The celebrity's experience of having a public self that is defined by others is therefore only different by degree and intensity because they are more often in the public eye (see Morrison 2014: 48; Webber 2011).

An analysis of the alienation experienced by celebrities can be taken from Sartre's account of how people respond to the objectification that comes with the way others perceive them. Sartre claims that appropriation by others only becomes alienating when we are guilty of 'bad faith', which is the belief that we do not have the freedom to be any other way than how others define us (see Santoni 1995: 1–27; Stevenson 1983: 257). This would mean that the public fix, define, and objectify not only our public personas but also our 'private' selves. This is the difference that Sartre makes between a 'being-in-itself', which is defined by these limitations set by others, and the 'being-for-itself', which accepts and acts upon the freedom to be something other than the way others perceive it. The waiter, for example, would act in 'bad faith' (as a 'being-in-itself') when he believes that he is defined only by the characteristics of being a waiter. The waiter, however, acts as a 'being-for-itself' when he fulfills the role required by his job with the knowledge that he is merely acting or 'playing' at being a waiter and that he is not limited by this public persona (see Khan 1984: 390; Phillips 1981).

According to Sartre, it is always the case that one's public persona is determined by how others perceive us. However, the experience of alienation that comes with this only arises when a person is guilty of 'bad faith', that is, when they identify both their public and private self as defined by the roles and characteristics that others confer onto them (see Santoni 1995: 110–38; Feldman and Hazlett 2013). Sartre's phenomenology therefore seems to make sense of the way in which some celebrities feel trapped and overwhelmed by their public persona and of the way a celebrity will feel alienated when the identity of that persona takes over their private life. This is the experience described by many celebrities, as discussed in section 1.

There is reason to doubt that Sartre's phenomenology accurately analyzes the alienation and disconnection felt as part of the celebrity experience. On Sartre's understanding, rather than explaining why a celebrity experiences *more* alienation than a noncelebrity does, instead it seems to suggest that celebrities are in a privileged position to overcome this alienation. In section 1 we discussed how celebrities report their experience of fame, often creating their public persona as a necessary coping mechanism to distance the public's appropriation of their image from their personal life. When the celebrity acknowledges or creates this split, they do so to regulate how much influence their public persona has over their personal life. This split is created only insofar as the celebrity already recognizes that they are more than their public persona and do not identify themselves with the characteristics or behaviors that the public expect of them. This means that, using Sartre's terminology, they are acting as a 'being-for-itself', with a belief that they are more than the objectification and appropriation conferred onto them by the public. The very fact that many celebrities report that they feel as if they were living two lives demonstrates that they are aware of the difference between these lives and that in their private lives they do not live the 'game' or 'role' of their public persona.

If Sartre is right, then the celebrity's experience of fame would put them at an advantage over the noncelebrity as far as avoiding the alienation arising from the objectification of the public is concerned. The less famous a person is, the less they will feel the need to create a coping mechanism and protection against public objectification, and the less aware they will be of how this objectification limits and defines who they are. The noncelebrity may be more likely to act in 'bad faith' simply because they are not forced to recognize how they identify with the perception that others have of them. The celebrity, by contrast, is made obviously aware of this, and often intentionally creates a divide between a public and private self to overcome the alienation and disconnect felt by this identification. The celebrity's choice to intentionally create this split resonates especially with what Sartre writes in the later parts of *Being and Nothingness*. He claims that whether we suffer at the hands of others is a 'choice' (1958: 520). However, from the way in which celebrities report their experience of fame it is evident that the alienation felt by celebrities persists even after they admit to or intentionally create a split between their private and public selves, and despite the fact that they do not believe they are wholly controlled by the perception of others. Sartre's phenomenological account does not easily explain why this alienation persists even if a person does not act in 'bad faith'.

In addition, the experience of alienation felt at the hand of public objectification is reported as being *more* intense for celebrities. This is partly because celebrities are more often in the public eye and so experience to a greater extent the objectification and lack of control that comes with a public persona. This might make it harder for celebrities to carve out a personal life that is distinct from their public persona even if they are not acting in 'bad faith'. In fact, as discussed in section 1, the reported experience of celebrity is that the 'public' and 'private' selves are closely connected—the public persona seeps into the celebrity's private life to the extent that the gap between the two is hard to delineate sharply. This

was highlighted by experiences of when things go wrong for the celebrity's public image—not only does public humiliation affect the celebrity persona, but as the examples of Taylor Swift and Annabel Christopher demonstrate, it can have devastating effects for the private self, upsetting personal relationships and well-being. As a result, the relationship between a celebrity's public image and their personal life is more complex and ambiguous than Sartre's phenomenology suggests. In the next section, we argue that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology offers a more appropriate account with which to analyze and explain the alienation that occurs as part of the experience of fame.

3. Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology and Uncanny Alienation

The experience of fame is paradoxical. On the one hand, many celebrities feel disconnected from their public image—they see it as being 'other' to their personal life, a persona that is objectified and controlled by others. A celebrity's public persona seems disconnected from their personal life because it regularly disrupts their autonomous agency, limiting and constraining what they can do and the choices that they can freely make. These limitations make it feel as if the public persona is 'external' or 'alien' to the celebrity's personal life. On the other hand, celebrities report feeling that this public persona still belongs to them and feels connected to their personal life. This is highlighted by the way in which the negative and positive effects of their public reputation seep into their personal lives. Although Merleau-Ponty does not explicitly discuss the nature of celebrity experience, we suggest that his phenomenological account of the relationship between self and body can be extended to gain valuable insights into this paradoxical experience of fame.

For Merleau-Ponty, the body is central to understanding our experience of the world as it is the place of interaction between subject and object—that is, the place where we realize that we are both a subject that can assert its agency and an object that can be appropriated and commodified. With the body we pursue our autonomous projects: we can pick up objects, care for our loved ones, and write philosophy papers. But it is also a 'thing among things' (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 137), an object in the world that can be used by others to pursue their projects. Our bodies can be looked at, cared for, and objectified by others. The body is both that which touches the world and can be touched; it is that with which we see the world, but it is also that which can be seen by others (1968: 141). As such, the body has a 'double reference' (1968: 137), highlighting the 'intimate' and 'intertwining' connection between subject and object (1968: 130, 183). For Merleau-Ponty, the experience of being a 'subject' is necessarily connected to and part of the experience of being an 'object' that can be appropriated by others (see Apostolopoulos 2017: 682–83; Daly 2016: 165–66).

By extension, the experience of being a celebrity can be reframed in terms of this interconnecting relationship between subject and object. The 'private self' is the one in which we experience our own subjectivity and autonomous agency, and the 'public self' is the one in which we experience the fact that we are also an object, at the mercy and disposal of others. But as Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body

highlights, the experience of being subject and object—or in the case of the celebrity, the experience of the private and public self—are not separated or disconnected from each other, but ‘crisscross’ and closely ‘communicate’ with each other (1968: 131–35, 141). Our experience of being a subject is always indexed to and limited by the fact that we are also an object in the world; there are some things we just cannot do, and there are some things we cannot control.

The limitation that comes with the interconnection between subject and object is not problematic or alienating when the two are compatible, when the self can pursue its projects and desires, and make choices without impediment. In fact, when things go right, we do not even notice the divide between subject and object. When lecturing one is both subject (that which is teaching) and object (looked at by one’s students), but the (hopefully) seamless nature of the experience means that we need not be aware of the divide. Relative to the celebrity experience, this would mean that when things go well, the private self of a celebrity is not restricted by their public image. The fact that a celebrity is objectified by the public is not alienating if the celebrity welcomes these expected behaviors as part of their personal life. If a celebrity’s private life would not have to change due to their fame, then they may not notice any disconnect with their public image at all—the correspondence between the two would be seamless.

It is when things go wrong that the difference between the experience of being a subject and object is then made explicit. This can be seen in the body when pain or illness restricts the way our bodies move and the choices we make; suddenly our bodies limit the expression and freedom of our agency. In extreme cases, illness takes over to such an extent that our sense of agency evaporates completely (see Burwood 2020). Here there is an experience of an alienating disconnect between subject and object, because the body is no longer able to do what our ‘self’ wants it to do. In the same way, it is when the celebrity’s public persona begins to limit and confine their autonomous agency that the disconnection between their public image and private self is felt as estranged and restrictive. In extreme cases, the private self and sense of autonomous agency seems to disappear altogether. However, the alienation that arises from the disconnect between subject and object is only possible because of the intimate connection and ‘double reference’ between the two. If ‘I did not belong to my body, if ‘I did not identify with it, then ‘I would not feel alienated by its deficiencies. It is because ‘I am both subject and object and *my* body-as-object is limiting *my* subjectivity that these limitations affect *my* sense of agency. The fact that ‘I identify with my body, that ‘I identify as both subject and object, is what renders this alienation possible. The alienation felt when things go wrong in the body is a strange one: it highlights how the body both belongs to ‘me,’ yet is something that ‘I feel estranged from. Richard Zaner explains this feeling as one of ‘uncanniness’, in which the body feels both ‘mine’ and ‘other’, experienced at the same time as ‘intimately alien, strangely mine’ (Zaner 1981: 5, 54, who takes and expands this notion of the ‘uncanny’ from Freud 2003).

Similarly to the alienation felt due to the divide between subject and object in the body, the experience of alienation felt as a result of the divide between a celebrity’s private self and their objectified public persona is only possible because the two

'selves' are implicated in each other. If the celebrity's private self were completely disconnected from their public persona, the restrictions and limitations placed on their private life would not alienate them. The celebrity is both their private self and their public persona, and so the alienation and estrangement they experience is uncanny—their public persona belongs to them and is perhaps even vital for their sense of self, yet is something from which they also feel estranged. In this uncanny experience, the public persona of the celebrity feels both 'strangely theirs' and 'intimately other'.

Using Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body therefore provides an analysis of the experience of being a celebrity that accommodates the ambiguous relationship between the celebrity's private self and public persona, in which they are both separate from each other yet closely connected. The understanding of this relationship as uncanny also explains why celebrities experience the alienation between their private and public selves more intensely than noncelebrities. In the same way that more pain or illness in the body often leads to a greater feeling of disconnection between subject and object, when it comes to the celebrity experience it is more likely that things will 'go wrong' in the relationship between their private and public selves. Because celebrities are more often in the public eye and foster great admiration and obsession among their fans, their public persona has the potential to be more likely appropriated beyond the celebrity's control, often completely restricting the agency of their autonomous agency and private self.

4. Integrity and the Challenge of Fame

We have proposed an analysis of the phenomenology of fame as one that involves both a sense of disconnection from one's public persona and a sense of being connected to this persona. As a result of this uncanny experience, the celebrity is faced with the challenge of how to respond to the conflict that arises between their public and private selves. On the one hand, the celebrity may have a public persona they feel alienated from, but on the other hand, this persona is also intimately connected to them and shapes many, if not all, of their private interactions. In this section, we discuss three ways in which a celebrity might approach this challenge: either (i) fully embracing their public persona, (ii) fully distancing themselves from their public persona, or (iii) critically engaging with the tension between their public and private selves. We argue that the first two of these approaches are problematic as they overlook the close connection between the public and private selves as highlighted by our phenomenological analysis and, furthermore, hinder the development and maintenance of the virtue of integrity. Instead, the most plausible response to the challenge of fame is to accept the conflict between the public and private self and find ways for them to interact creatively and critically with each other.

The first approach a celebrity might take in trying to avoid the conflict posed by their experience of fame is to eradicate the divide between their public and private selves altogether, turning themselves into their public persona. In doing so, any feelings of disassociation or disconnection are removed—the celebrity *just is* their public persona. This seems to be the strategy Taylor Swift attempted in the early

stages of her career; as she explains in a recent documentary, 'I became the person everyone wanted me to be' (Wilson 2020). This initially seems to be a desirable approach: celebrities would no longer live two separated and often conflicting lives, and this would automatically remove any sense of alienation. There can be no disconnection if there is nothing to disconnect from.

However, as our phenomenological analysis in the previous sections has demonstrated, this strategy is problematic because it overlooks the close connection between a celebrity's public and private self. A celebrity who conforms to the role the public imposes on them is acting, as Sartre calls it, in 'bad faith'. This means that they allow the public to define all aspects of their life, unable to see that they are something different from and more than the public's expectations. Here, the celebrity's public persona still disrupts the autonomous agency of the private self, limiting the celebrity's personal choices and infiltrating many aspects of what should be a 'personal' life. If the celebrity envelops themselves in their public persona, this disruption, limitation, and lack of agency is merely hidden and ignored until things start to 'go wrong' and the public persona spirals out of the celebrity's control. Celebrities themselves acknowledge that this strategy does not work. As highlighted in section 1, the public often appropriates a celebrity's public persona to the extent that it becomes alien to the celebrity, and they feel disconnected from 'who they really are.' For example, Swift's strategy of becoming her public persona failed because, in her own words, 'When you are living from the approval of strangers, one bad thing can cause everything to crumble' (Wilson 2020). As a result, insofar as celebrities value their autonomous agency, this first strategy to avoid the conflict caused by fame is undesirable. To avoid the public appropriating their sense of self, celebrities might attempt to treat their public persona as something completely unrelated to their 'private' self. In doing so, they would aim to split or separate their private and public selves completely and treat the public self as having nothing to do with how they live away from the public eye. As we have explained in section 1, this is the approach that Rockwell and Giles (2009) describe many celebrities as taking as they try to protect their supposed 'real', 'original', or 'private' selves.

This seems to be a desirable strategy: if a celebrity's private self is completely disconnected from their public persona, then the limitations and restrictions posed by the public persona need not alienate their private self. This seems to be most effective when a celebrity's public self is very obviously and radically different from their personal life. In extreme cases, this can involve celebrities refusing to show their face in public. For instance, in order to hide her 'true' identity, the Australian musician Sia would often wear a paper bag covering her head. Similarly, the Irish author, podcaster, and musician Blindboy Boatclub only appears on stage with a shopping bag covering his head to avoid 'the absolute hell' of being recognized (Freyne 2019). There are also examples of comedians who have successfully created radically different public personas, such as Paul O'Grady's persona as Lily Savage and Al Murray as the Pub Landlord.

However, this 'splitting' approach is problematic for two reasons. First, as our phenomenological analysis has highlighted, the public and private selves are intimately connected. No matter how distinct or separated a celebrity's public

persona is from their private self, the persona still ‘belongs’ to the celebrity and is part of the experience of their personal life. This is the reason why alienation is felt in the first place; the public persona is uncannily experienced as both ‘strangely theirs’ and ‘intimately other’. As a result, celebrities who attempt to separate completely from their public persona find themselves unable to do so, and this only increases the frustration that comes with an attempt to mitigate feelings of alienation. As Blindboy Boatclub conceded in a recent interview, his public persona ‘has increasingly become indistinguishable from his real personality’ (Freyne 2019).

Second, by attempting to disassociate themselves from their public persona, celebrities may close themselves off from developing and maintaining the virtue of integrity. On some accounts, integrity is said to involve possessing a character that is based on identity-conferring commitments and stays true to those commitments (Williams 1973). On other accounts, integrity is said to involve standing for something in front of others (Calhoun 1995; see Miller 2013 for an overview). For our purposes though, we focus on one widely held conception of integrity, which holds that having integrity consists in having a self that is whole and integrated (see Taylor 1981, Cottingham 2010, and Archer 2017 for further defenses of this view). On this integrated-self account, a life of integrity is one in which the various parts of oneself (for example, one’s goals, projects, desires, ambitions, and emotional responses) fit together into an integrated whole. In Cottingham’s words, such a life is characterized by ‘psychological wholeness—an understanding of the significance of all her various goals and desires, and the true place of each in her overall life-plan’ (2010: 8).

An integrated life can be contrasted with a ‘fragmented’ life, which can take various forms. Most interestingly for our purposes, this fragmentation may occur due to a life that is compartmentalized. Alasdair MacIntyre (2007: 204) describes such a life as one divided into ‘a variety of segments, each with its own norms and modes of behavior. So work is divided from leisure, private life from public, the corporate from the personal’. Compartmentalizing one’s life into clearly demarcated public and private selves, in the way that a celebrity might, is a paradigmatic example of how a life may be fragmented and lack integrity (Storr 1960: 170).

Given that fully embracing or distancing oneself from one’s public persona either does not work or gives rise to a lack of an integrated self, we suggest that celebrities should instead embrace the tension between the identities of their private self and public persona, and seek to mediate the conflict creatively. Rockwell and Giles (2009: 203) have described the tension between the public image and private self as an ‘existential juggling act’, and by adopting this strategy, celebrities find a way intentionally to ‘juggle’ their different selves in a creative way. While the uncanny experience of fame can give rise to destructive forms of alienation, this can be used productively and creatively with its own kind of value.

There are many examples of celebrities successfully responding to their experience of fame in exactly this way. For instance, Barbara Leaming (1982: 144) claims Roman Polanski’s films benefitted from and, in fact, may even have been generated by a response to the very tension caused by the split of his public and private identities. Similarly, after being in the public eye for almost eighteen years and releasing nine studio albums, Taylor Swift announced in 2021 that she was

releasing re-recorded versions of her previous albums. This move was prompted by an ownership dispute over the rights to Swift's recorded material; however, as Alice Vincent (2021) has commented, the re-recording has provided Swift with an opportunity to assert authority over her public image. By re-recording the material that Swift created as a teenager, she has confronted her fans with two realizations: first, that her personal life is deeply affected by the way in which her public image is commodified and, second, that she has aged, and as a result her public persona and the expectations placed on it must change too (Vincent 2021). In this way, Swift critically engages with different versions of her public persona, interacting with and scrutinizing a younger version of her public image (Li 2021).

Another way of exploring this tension is to adopt different personas at different stages in one's career. David Bowie, for example, has adopted many different public personas throughout his career, including Major Tom, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane, The Soul Man and The Thin White Duke. As Nick Stevenson (2006) argues, Bowie has used these personas to explore the way in which celebrities relate to their public image. By recognizing and paying attention to the uncanny tension that arises from the intimate relationship between one's private and public selves, the celebrity is able to transform what was once an alienating relationship into one that has the potential to be creative and empowering. As these examples demonstrate, creatively engaging with the tension between one's public and private selves does not necessarily mean the celebrity only creates work *about* their fame; rather, the celebrity also critically engages with their experience of fame to influence the work they create, without either becoming or rejecting their public persona.

This way of understanding a celebrity's relationship with their public persona fits well with an account of integrity that allows for the possibility that a self may be integrated without being unified. This more holistic account of integrity has been developed in response to the work of Maria Lugones. According to Lugones (1990), at the time she was writing, there was no way for her to unify her identity as a Latin American woman with her identity as a lesbian. Her Hispanic values were rejected within the lesbian communities she occupied, while her lesbian values were rejected in her Hispanic communities. While Lugones saw no way to unify these two parts of her identity, she argued that she could hold on to both of them as a 'multiplicitous being' (Lugones 1990: 139). Lugones's claims about these conflicting parts of her identity seem to create a challenge for integrated-self accounts of integrity. It seems implausible that the only way for Lugones to live with integrity would be to abandon one part of her identity in order to create one unified and integrated self.

However, Lugones suggests that her different selves and identities can and do connect with each other, with no need to betray either one of these identities (Lugones 1990:145). This connection is made possible through a critical interaction between the two, continually reassessing and responding to the tensions between them. As Victoria Davion argued in response to this, the critical interaction demonstrated by Lugones shows how a multiplicitous being can have integrity, 'if she can somehow keep a connection between her two selves alive, as long as one can critique the other' (Davion 1991: 190). As Archer (2017: 451)

develops this point, an integrated self need not be a unitary self, just as an integrated society need not involve assimilating everyone into one cultural identity. A multiplicitous being can have integrity so long as the two selves are brought into dialogue with each other and neither acts to undermine the other. This approach provides a useful way to understand how celebrities ought to mediate the relationship between their public and private selves; the celebrity will simultaneously hold these two different parts of their multiplicitous identity, finding ways for the two to interact critically and respond to the tension that arises as a result. As we have suggested elsewhere, being able to construct and manage one's public image in this creative way is one of the skills that a successful celebrity will develop and express to a very high level (Robb and Archer 2022).

This approach to the uncanny experience of fame is one that fits with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of the relationship between subject and object, as discussed in section 4. Merleau-Ponty claims that there is never a moment in which we are only a subject with autonomous agency, or only an object being appropriated and looked at by others. Instead, we are both subject and object at the same time, holding together these two parts of our identity. This is exemplified by Merleau-Ponty's description of the moment in which the right hand of the body touches the left. In this instant, the hands become an object of touch *and* a subject that is touching—the body is both touched and touching at the same time (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 141). However, this does not entail that there is no difference or tension between the two; when my two hands touch, I experience my right hand as either touched *or* touching, as subject *or* object. Even though I am both subject and object, there is a tension between the two experiences that results in their never being able to overlap fully or superimpose themselves on one another (1968: 147–49). For Merleau-Ponty this tension is not negative but highlights the moment of transition between subject and object, a moment that is filled with the potential for interaction and activity.

This close yet interrupted identification between subject and object can be extended to understand the celebrity's response to the conflict between their public image and private life. Trying fully to embrace or reject the public persona mistakenly underplays the close connection between the celebrity's public and private selves. This does not mean that there is no difference or tension between the two, nor does it imply that the celebrity cannot identify with one of those 'selves' more strongly at any given time. What it does entail, however, is that the gap and tension between the public and private selves is filled with the potential for an interaction between the two. It is in response to this tension that a celebrity critically engages what might seem to be fragmented and compartmentalized aspects of their life. As such, celebrities can potentially avoid the damaging feelings of alienation and estrangement that so many celebrities report as part of their experience of fame.

5. We Are All Celebrities Now

The experience of being a celebrity is uncanny and poses a challenge to those who live in the public eye. On the one hand, celebrities report a sense of feeling divided

between a private self and a public persona, resulting in feelings of disconnection, alienation, and a lack of control. Nevertheless, celebrities also explain feeling connected to their public persona and report the way in which that persona seeps into their private life. In sections 2 and 3, we analyzed this tension by drawing on the phenomenology of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, arguing that the experience of alienation arises due to the paradoxical connection between a celebrity's private and public selves. This is an uncanny experience in which a celebrity's public persona feels 'intimately other' and 'strangely theirs.' In section 4, we analyzed how celebrities can respond to this conflict in relation to developing and maintaining the virtue of integrity. We have argued that celebrities should not fully reject or embrace their public persona, but engage critically and creatively with the tension that arises from the difference between their public and private lives.

Even though this strategy of critical engagement is the most plausible way to respond to the challenge of fame, it does face two practical challenges. First, in order for a celebrity to 'juggle' and mediate between their public image and private self, there needs to be space for the private self to exist in the first place. This means that the public needs to allow room for a celebrity to navigate their personal life without intrusion. This practical challenge makes sense of the way in which well-documented paparazzi interference into the private lives of celebrities is considered to be harmful (McNamara 2015), inhibiting the celebrity's ability to demarcate and explore the relationship between their private and public selves successfully.

Second, in order for the celebrity to be at liberty to navigate the tension between their public and private selves creatively, the public needs to allow for change in a celebrity's public persona. The public is not always forthcoming in this respect. For example, Taylor Swift recently made headlines by publicly announcing her political views. In response to her political activism, Swift received negative responses from the media and other public figures, with some claiming that it was not her place to announce her personal views in this way (Wilson 2020). As such, to allow for a critical interaction between a public image and private life, the celebrity must face the practical challenge of navigating their audience's responses to their changing public personas. This is far from easy and, as James Baldwin argued, to take on a role in public is dangerous: 'The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy—in fact, it is always extremely hard—to maintain a watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is' (Baldwin 1998: 270–71). This practical challenge is likely to be especially difficult for celebrities who are part of oppressed groups as they are more likely to face resistance if they attempt to step outside the accepted norms assigned to them. As the media studies scholar Milly Williamson (2010: 118) points out, the negative attitudes directed by the public toward celebrities often reflect gender and class-based prejudices. For example, pointing to the media treatment of American pop singer Britney Spears, Williamson argues that Spears's public image had been carefully constructed to fulfill the role available to female celebrities at the time. The formation of Spears's public persona was therefore both deliberately managed and tightly constrained by what was expected of her as a 'female' celebrity; these norms consisted of

simultaneously holding the contradictory social ideals of femininity and sexuality. When Spears no longer played this role and no longer exhibited these norms and ideals, she was punished with harsh and widespread criticism from the public, including the media and some of her fans. While Williamson's account focuses on the gender and class prejudices that influence these negative responses, there are other biases that often reflect these discriminatory attitudes, such as certain prejudices against race, disability, and age. The intersection of these biases will often enhance the discrimination that celebrities face (see, for example, Sobande 2018 and Flood 2019).


Moreover, celebrities who are members of oppressed groups are often considered to serve as representatives for that group. Take the representative role played by Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play major league baseball. As Grant Farred (2018: 45) claims, the public gave Robinson the role of 'doing something for his race', and his behavior was consequently judged as representative of that collective identity. This places an imposing constraint on Robinson's behavior, both in terms of his public and private selves, as any failure on his part would be taken as a failure of African Americans in general. As a result, when a celebrity's public persona is considered to be representative of a group of people with a particular identity, the opportunities for exploring the tension between that persona and the private self become constrained by the responsibility conferred on the persona by the public.

The focus in this paper has been to analyze the paradoxical experience of being a celebrity and the alienation that arises from this as involving an uncanny relationship between one's public persona and private self. It is important to note, however, that this uncanny celebrity experience is merely an extreme version of the experience that we all face when navigating the way in which others perceive and respond to us. In section 2 we discussed Sartre's claim that we are all subject to the objectifying gaze of the other and potentially guilty of acting in 'bad faith'—this is not unique to the celebrity experience. Similarly, in section 3, we explained Merleau-Ponty's account of the relationship between the self as a perceiving subject and as a perceived object that can be appropriated and objectified by others—this is also experienced by noncelebrities. The celebrity experience is different in degree rather than kind, as an amplification of the ways in which the divide between one's public persona and private self can go wrong and result in feelings of alienation and estrangement.

This divide is highlighted even further due to the rise of the internet and social media, offering a wider range of opportunities for both celebrities and noncelebrities to experiment with their public image and broadcast this to a wider audience (see Rodogno 2012: 322). These technological advancements provide the platform to turn us all into celebrities; fame is no longer an exceptional experience but a phenomenon that is ever more pervasive in everyday life. As a result, it is now increasingly relevant for us to question how we create and relate to our public personas and to the potentially uncanny experience of disconnection and alienation that results from this. According to the phenomenological account of fame we have offered in this paper, fully embracing or rejecting one's public image does not effectively mitigate the negative effects of the alienation that arises from the public's appropriation and objectification of celebrities' public personas.

Instead, we ought to engage critically with the tension that arises between our public personas and private lives, transforming what could be an alienating experience into one that has the potential to be creative and empowering.

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