



Blonde Biographies

*Notable Flaxen-Haired American Women:
The Post-Postmodernity
of Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith*

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Seduction is not that which is *opposed to* production. It is that which
produces production...

---Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*

INFOTAINMENT AS DE FACTO BIOGRAPHY

America's fascination with young blonde women has elevated some of these flaxen-haired images to stardom via televised news stories, special reports,

and movies-of-the-week. These broadcasts create an ongoing biography of their lives: the ups and downs, trials and tribulations, births and deaths. The lives are presented in segments, or chapters, over days, weeks, even months and years, in the form of news features, soundbites, commentary, episodes of *E! True Hollywood Story*, *Snapped!*, and *Boulevard of Broken Dreams*.

Infotainment is the new form of visual biography—*de facto biography* may be the appropriate term. Take all the news and tabloid program items together, string them in chronological order, and a biographical text can be formed. The gaze of the viewer, combined with memory and bias, will, over time, fashion a biography inside the mind of the witness.

We have to question what is true and real in the infotainment broadcasts. Incidents and words taken out of context can be misconstrued and misunderstood, intentionally and accidentally. This is the “spin.” These spins are components of Jean Baudrillard’s theory

of the simulacra that “tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation, simulation envelopes the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum.” For Baudrillard, there are four “successive” phases of the image:

- it is the reflection of basic reality
- it masks and perverts a basic reality
- it masks the absence of a basic reality
- it bears no relation to any reality whatsoever:
it is own pure simulacrum.

The biographed object is at the mercy of the infotainment broadcaster who may present, and represent, a false life story. The danger here is that the person biographed may come to believe the lie of his/her life, or—more often—participate in creating a life never lived (other than through false images). We see this dilemma time and again with newly minted media stars (TV, cinema, music) who have social and mental breakdowns: misuse of alcohol and drugs, embarrassing public exploits,

entry into hospitals and rehab centers for “exhaustion.” Later, in interviews, they often cite the hype that is manufactured by publicists and studios as to who they are, and their inability to maintain the façade, always fearful (as Ben Affleck stated about his own alcoholism) that people are talking behind their backs and the world will find out the truth—that is, their *real* biography.

Sometimes the star is more than happy to co-create a fictional image—they participate in the simulacra and often are the original architect—Paris Hilton and Anna Nicole Smith are prime examples of this engaged auto/biography, and the main subjects of this essay on blonde icons. Both women have been accused of “being famous for being famous.” They lack a formal, typical route to global stardom—they were neither actresses nor models at the start; they are simply in the public view, a gaze held long with the grotesque nature of hyper-consumerism.

BAUDRILLARD, THIRD WAVE FEMINISM, AND PARIS HILTON

Similar to *The Truman Show*—a Philip K. Dickian movie about a man whose days, from birth onward, are televised for the whole world’s viewing pleasure—the Paris Hilton story does not need a written biography to be documented and chronicled. With paparazzi always on her path, her antics in Hollywood posted on TMZ.com within minutes of occurrence, and the latest scandal covered by every international news outlet—whether it be a tabloid or Fox News—we watch her life unfold on the small screens like a soap opera with typical twists and turns, sordid sex scenes, and courtroom drama. Her two *E! True Hollywood Story* segments act as an anthology of the collected news items, creating what would be akin to “Part I” or “Part II” in the ongoing “book” of her cultural gaze.¹

TMZ.com and similar “news” websites further

contribute chapters to the serial biography of Paris Hilton. A fight with another celebutante, an arrest, a quick flash of genitals—the photos and one-paragraph story are posted minutes later. Viewers are able to experience Paris’s life in near real-time. She becomes the simulacra, however, when she *knows* this will happen; her conscious participation makes her an auto/biographer. Paris knows the image she must maintain, she perpetuates her own illusion, so that she enters the system of objects, the arena of consumerism: she is selling her image whether she is doing a hamburger commercial, starring in a home porn video, or going out for a night of club-hopping (she claims her fee to “appear” at events is in the \$100,000-1 million range²). Young women across the world despise her but also want to live her life; they purchase the same style of clothes she wears, they buy products she has endorsed or is in business with, such as her line of perfume. Paris engages in the act of creating clones of herself—at least she used to; after her arrest and incarceration, her appeal

has waned. The time in jail was the turning point in her biography—either it would end, or she would reinvent herself.

If Jean Baudrillard were still alive, one wonders what he would have had to say about Paris Hilton’s life as she captivated and ruled world news with her incarceration. An article on the humorous website AvantNews.com (“Tomorrow’s News Today”) entitled “Paris Hilton Restoration Completed” is dated July 12, 2010.³ The name behind this \$25 million restoration is none other than

Jacques Baudrillard, the project manager responsible for the Paris Hilton’s makeover, said, “We feel confident that that once people see this new Paris Hilton they will say, ‘Paris Hilton, now I could have a good time in that,’ and then come and stay the night.”

According to Mr. Baudrillard, the last decade has been a difficult one for the Paris Hilton due to a deteriorating exterior, multiple internal plumbing issues causing leaks, and the entrances, both front and rear, being ill-suited for the amount of people

coming and going.

“The old Paris Hilton’s star had faded and people were being driven away from her in droves by the sight and smell of her,” Mr. Baudrillard said.

Future news as the simulacra of news—yet another infotainment text. But what is it telling us? Baudrillard and Paris Hilton have much in common. Cultural theories presented during Baudrillard’s critical career encompass both the image and body of Paris Hilton. She has become the ultimate simulacrum of herself—photos, gossip news, fashion ads, TV spots, she has to keep up with the image she has (pro)created. To not live up to the image means to not be Paris Hilton. When she emerged from the L.A. jail’s Towers after her stint in jail, she would have been unrecognizable if we did not know who she was; without her make-up and clothes and dog in hand, she looked like any ordinary girl in southern California. Many critics commented that she, in fact, looked *better*, “cuter,” without the glam and hairstyle.

She is also a third wave feminist. This statement will not be popular with critics, scholars, and students of third wave feminism. But let’s look at the definition of third wave feminism, an ambiguous task in itself. The best place to start is the Google search. Eminsims.org claims there

is no definition for third wave feminisms that are officially agreed upon [...] [We] re-define third wave feminism as the feminism “outside of” the second wave rather than “after,” and as the feminism that starts from the realization that there are many power imbalances among women that are as serious and important as the power imbalance between women and men. Whether or not you agree with this proposition, I think it served the purpose of challenging the presumption that second and third waves of feminism are about generational divide and starting a more sophisticated discussion about what it means to be a third wave feminist.

Wikipedia.org—which while not academically the most reliable source of information, is nonetheless

the most used pop culture source—states that the

Third-wave [sic] of feminism began in the early 1990s. The movement arose as a response to perceived failures of the second-wave. It was also a response to the backlash against initiatives and movements created by the second-wave. Third-wave feminism seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems the second-wave's "essentialist" definitions of femininity which (according to them) over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle class white women. A post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality is central to much of the third-wave's ideology. Third-wave feminists often focus on "micropolitics," and challenged the second-wave's paradigm as to what is, or is not, good for females.

Lisa Jervis, co-founder of *Bitch Magazine*, writes in the Winter 2004 *Ms. Magazine*:

The metaphor wraps up differences in age, ideology, tactics and style, and pretends that distinguishing among these factors is unimportant. Even the more

nuanced discussions of third-wavers tend to cast them (or, given my birthday, should I say "us"?) as sex-obsessed young thangs with a penchant for lip gloss and a disregard for recent history...

Somewhere within all the discourse lies the rejoinder; but it is agreed that the third wave feminist (re)*invents herself*, embraces images of celebrity, and is unafraid of her sexuality—such as sex workers who categorize pornography as empowering rather than demeaning. The release of Paris Hilton's homemade porn tape reinforces her place in the third wave and is the chronicle of her sexual biography. The tape reveals to the world the intimate practices behind closed doors—when she performs fellatio on her lover, she is held up to public scrutiny on her experience and technique; when her lover pulls her hair during intercourse, the biography of her "kinks" is placed into the historical record.

Paris Hilton *was* authoring her televised biography,

her handlers acting as ghostwriters, until she was sent to jail—now she was no longer in control of her destiny. Several major incidents were in the news on June 26, 2007: a police officer in Ohio was arrested for murdering his pregnant girlfriend and five suicide bomb attacks occurred throughout Iraq, killing and injuring many civilians and soldiers. These were eclipsed in all major media outlets as the world's cameras, in unison, gazed on the Towers, downtown Los Angeles (the allusion to the World Trade Center too obvious), awaiting the release of Paris Hilton as if she were a political dissident being held by a tyrannical regime (in this case, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office). She emerged a completely different image—no makeup⁴, thinner, happy to be free.

ART OF THE TRAINWRECK

Anna Nicole Smith also set out to create a televised auto/biography when she agreed to let the cameras in on her life for a reality show, the first to start a *fin de*

siècle popular trend of airing the day-to-day antics of the rich and (in)famous. Anna Nicole's name became synonymous with trainwreck as she allowed many embarrassing personal moments in the final cut of the episodes. When she moved from a reality TV star to a public news figure, what was seen on the TV screen went from auto/biography to formal biography. She was no longer in control now that she had passed away.

Her lived experience contains all the genre elements of the best potboilers: sex, drugs, death. Her tragedies are both Arthurian and Greek in context and scope. When she gives birth to a new child, her adult child dies in the same hospital room from a drug overdose. When she also dies of an overdose in Hollywood, Florida, her infant, like a precious and royal prize, is fought for by heroes and foes alike—there is the biological father who wants to preserve what is left of the family; there is the shady lawyer who claims he is the father but is only interested in the possible monetary legacy; and there is the estranged mother who seeks claim to her

grandchild for both genetics and fortune. There was even a European prince (who purchased the title), husband of Zsa Zsa Gabor (and step-grandmother of Paris Hilton) claiming the baby might also be his! The infant becomes Excalibur; whoever wins custody will yield the power of a kingdom—or tens of millions of dollars. This sounds like a plot outline for a daytime soap opera—stripper/model marries wheelchair-bound octogenarian multi-millionaire, inherits fortune, sleeps with so many men no one knows who the father is. Is it no wonder the news outlets eschewed war, famine, and murder to broadcast this biography, as millions sat on the edge of their seats to find out what would happen next? (Or were forced to watch because there was nothing else presented as news.)

And so we gaze at Anna Nicole making legal history when her inheritance case goes to the Supreme Court. Law students have lofty dreams of arguing complex, groundbreaking cases before the 11 justices that have the power to shape history, society, and culture;

practicing lawyers with ambition chomp at the bit for a case that will take them to Washington, D.C. For Anna Nicole, her milestone moment continued to be a spectacle, as she dressed conservatively for court and the paparazzi eagerly recorded it all for those who desired the gaze.

Deceased, Anna Nicole's life narrative moved from trainwreck to legal thriller. There were not only courtroom battles for custody of her child, but for her dead body as well, that "baby on ice," as the judge called her. The experiences of the blonde and (in)famous greatly affect the lives of people they do not know. This is the true evidence of fame; like a religious icon will transform the lives of everyday people for centuries, so do the choices made by Paris and Anna Nicole.⁵

ON ICE

For Baudrillard, this engagement in the frenzy of the visual is the true pornography, the "real" obscenity. Do visual biographies of heinous crimes result in *more*

crimes? When individuals pay too much attention to the grisly and grotesque of negative news, becoming obsessed with the frenzy, a result is depression, anxiety, and a general fear of stepping out the door and interacting with the world. What responsibility does the media have for the well-being of the obsessive gaze, or is it the gazer who is responsible for taking action, who must reach for the remote and simply turn off the TV?

The repercussion—for Paris and Anna Nicole—is that when their biographies are televised, their bodies disappear: Paris vanishes into the hellish caverns of the Los Angeles County jail; Anna Nicole is “kept on ice” for a month in Florida as three parties fight for the right to her dead flesh. Being blonde and famous can be dangerous and life-threatening. The popular saying “blondes have more fun” may not necessarily be true, but they do get substantial attention and face time when they get in trouble. This could be why many women choose to dye their hair blonde—it’s a competitive

world in TV Land, and everyone needs that edge to acquire approval of the gaze, the broadcast of a life lived.

NOTES

1. Her published memoirs count as contributions, but bring up a question: since the books were ghost-written, are they truly memoir or the simulacrum thereof? With a ghostwriter, auto/biography essentially becomes biography.
2. Several years ago, I attended the opening of a new club in downtown San Diego, covering it for the gossip column of an alternative weekly; Paris Hilton was on the VIP list. Rumor had it that she was paid half a million dollars for her appearance, with a room in the W Hotel and her own driver and limo 24/7 during her stay. I mostly saw her on the dancefloor by herself. She had her dog with her. She posed for many photos, drank a lot of drinks, but it appeared that she was alone, that people were afraid (or loathed) to approach her, befriend her, or even dance with her. It called to mind that hackneyed saying: “It is lonely at the top.”
3. I will not look for metaphysical significance in the fact that this “future” article is dated on my birthday. On July 12, 2010, I will be 43 years old. If you are reading this after that date, it is a moot point.
4. A friend of mine attended Spike TV’s 2007 Scream Awards, walking the red carpet by being the date of someone nominated, where Paris Hilton made also an appearance on the red carpet. “She had so much make-up on, it was dripping off her,” my friend said. “How can people do that to themselves? They’re not even real.” “We are now in the third stage of the sign,” contends sociologist Norman K. Denzin in *Images of Postmodern Society* (Sage, 1992). “The sign has become reality, or the hyperreal; the sign, that is, masks the fact that there is no basic reality” (7).
5. Humorous images of both women, dressed in nun’s habits, have appeared on the Internet, attributing to their religious-like icon status.