

KARDASHIAN KULTURE

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KARDASHIAN KULTURE

How Celebrities Changed
Life in the 21st Century

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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CHAPTER 1

MIRACULOUS ENGAGEMENT

You probably haven't heard of Dorje Mingma. He was a Nepalese Sherpa assisting a Swiss expedition to climb Mount Everest. On October 31, 1952, he was killed by falling ice and buried in the windless basin known as the Valley of Silence. Dorje Mingma was the last mountaineer to die trying to climb Everest, before the alp was finally conquered in the following year by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, whose names are much more familiar.

Anna Nicole Smith died in 2007. The comparison may be tenuous, but the last person to fail and perish before an acclaimed triumph is usually forgotten. Smith was a *Playboy* centerfold, a model for Guess Jeans, occasional actor, diet products' endorser and sometime reality show star who was nearly-but-not-quite famous for being famous.

Born Vickie Lynn Hogan in Mexia, Texas in 1967, she married at 17 and had a son. Her idol was Marilyn Monroe. Working as a pole dancer at Gigi's, a strip club in Houston, in 1991, she caught the eye of a customer, who, according to *Forbes* (March 4, 2013), offered her \$4,000 a month for 'consulting.' He was J. Howard Marshall II, a recently widowed oil billionaire. In 1994, the uncommon couple married; he was

89 and Smith was 26. Within 14 months, Marshall was dead, leaving behind an estate valued at \$1.6 billion.

Smith made no secret of her desire to be at the center of public scrutiny. Once asked if the generous media coverage she received after her relationship with Marshall became known bothered her, she laughed: ‘Oh, no, I like it ... I love the paparazzi. They take pictures and I just smile away. I’ve always liked attention.’

This probably gave away her game: she practically invited the media into her life, rarely missing the chance to turn a photo opportunity into a fiasco; she’d guzzle champagne from the bottle, flash her ample breasts and behave amorously with both women and men. Her exhibitionism knew no bounds. And the plot in which she featured made onlookers indignant or sympathetic, but probably not much in-between; she was what we often call a divisive figure – someone who causes disagreement between people. Of course, this made her a great narrative: blonde, white-trash gold-digger, who parties like an airstrike, splattering anyone in range, drops lucky and marries one of the richest men in America months before he croaks.

Even better, in 2002, the E! network capitalized on what was then the embryonic new TV genre, the reality show, by launching *The Anna Nicole Show*. This chronicled the minutiae of her everyday life, like visiting the dentist and feeding her dog, Sugar Pie, Prozac. The series ended in 2004. Smith also featured in advertisements for TrimSpa, a diet supplement. In 2006, she gave birth to a daughter and, in a dreadful twist of fate, Smith’s son from her first marriage died while visiting her and the new baby in the Bahamas. Cause of death: lethal interaction of methadone and antidepressants.

A long-running legal case seesawed until 2006 when the US Supreme Court ruled in a way that appeared to open the way for Smith to receive over \$450 million from her ex-husband’s estate, though she died on February 8, 2007, from

an accidental overdose, without seeing a penny. In June the same year, Paris Hilton started her prison sentence. Everyone, it seemed, was talking about her. She was Hillary to Smith's Mingma; everybody knows the former, but not many remember the latter, who came close, but failed.

Smith was ahead of her time – not by much, but enough to prevent her capitalizing on the new fascination for celebrities. She embodied all the basic or intrinsic qualities of the new type of celebrity. But in the mid-1990s, there were no reality TV shows (at least not by that name), nor the promotional apparatus to handle putatively talentless personalities and no public with sufficient curiosity to become ensorcelled by someone who appeared to be just a Marilyn manqué. Then, a butterfly flapped its wings and set in motion a connecting sequence of events that delivered seismic activity.

When in 2003 Barbra Streisand learned that an aerial photograph of her California beach house was among 12,000 pictures uploaded to the internet as part of a collection, she did what any self-respecting Academy Award-winning artist, with ecstatically reviewed Broadway and West End shows, more number one albums than any other woman and over 50 million records sold, would do: she sued. After all, she was *la prima diva*: temperamental perhaps, and rumored to be difficult to please. Streisand is said to have demanded that all hotel staff at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas enter and leave her room backwards and not make eye contact (even Queen Elizabeth permits gawping). Watching her 1991 film *Prince of Tides* on TV, Streisand considered the commercials too loud, so she hotlined NBC television to tell them to turn it down, allegedly.

So, when the California Coastal Records Project, which maintains an online photographic archive of almost the entire California coastline, reproduced images that included shots of her Malibu mansion, Streisand objected the action violated

her privacy. The problem was that Streisand's legal move was generously publicized and her attempt to suppress the pictures paradoxically encouraged a half-million people to rush to their computers to look at her home online. It was an explosive backfire and a case that introduced a new phrase into our lexicon: the Streisand Effect, when an attempt to prevent something actually causes it to happen, like the butterfly that stops fluttering to try to prevent an earthquake.

There was another less well-known but more apocalyptic meaning secreted in the Streisand affair: it blew apart the concept of privacy. If someone as illustrious, and revered as Streisand, with money, influence and status couldn't get her own way, who could? Two years before, she might have prevailed. But by 2003, the net was undergoing a kind of democratization. The piece of technology known as Web 2.0 was changing the internet from a source of information into a fully interactive platform. Users were able to communicate with each other and create text, images or videos – what we later called memes – which they could then share with others. The newly social nature of the internet effectively meant it became lawless. If the pictures of Streisand's home were online, there was nothing she could do in practical terms to stop people looking at them. Audiences had control. Initially, this disturbed, later provoked and still later challenged, not just A-listers like Streisand but anyone who sought fame. Actually, it changed all of us.

There's an invisible filament joining this event to Kim Kardashian. People idolize her almost as much as she seems to idolize herself, but without quite knowing why (well, maybe she knows something we don't). She's uncoupled greatness from achievement in the sense that she is acknowledged as one of the best known and distinct women in the world; she has a certain eminence and creates an aura with her presence, yet boasts few tangible achievements beyond

her own gravitational sphere. She appears and sells stuff, but not much else. Not even film turkeys, flopped records or remaindered books (her sole contribution to literature, a 2015 book called *Selfish*, sold decently). Then there is the feeling of intimacy with others who are, at once, proximate and remote. Other celebrities of the twenty-first century had created bonds of digital familiarity but none had exploited the possibilities offered by the post-Web 2.0 interactivity more fully than Kardashian and her family. When audiences were drawn to the twitter feeds of Rihanna, Lady Gaga and Britney Spears in the 2000s, Kim Kardashian was learning from Paris Hilton, observing how her mentor was able to keep pace with entertainers who had what could be described as traditional talents.

Kim and her family were sovereign and unrivaled for their craft and ingenuity. If they'd surfaced in, say, the 1990s, it's possible to imagine they would have been greeted with shrieks of derision and dismissed as unwholesomely talentless, self-adoring exhibitionists. Correction: they probably wouldn't be greeted with anything at all; more likely, the whole family would be totally ignored while audiences trained their attentions on the likes of Madonna and Michael Jackson, artists who somehow managed to provoke and disturb audiences and produce entertainment of the first magnitude.

Later, Kim Kardashian produced entertainment; in fact, she fascinated people, though exactly how and why was not abundantly clear. But in 2007, the year when *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* started on TV, something comparable to 9/11 was happening to culture. I don't wish to overstate unpleasant similarities; the date of the attack on New York's World Trade Center in 2001 is a singular event and among its manifold consequences was a pervasive awareness that the most deadly weapon was also the most basic – life itself. Suicide attacks characterized an era in which conventional

wisdom on just about everything was exchanged for an admission that we knew little.

We know little about what we've decided to call celebrity culture. People still scratch their heads and wonder about Kim Kardashian; she gives her best performances by doing almost nothing. And we act as if we're mesmerized by her and her relatives. As the post-9/11 mood reminded us we knew little, the epoch ushered in by the Kardashians prompts us to wonder whether we even know the right questions to ask, never mind the answers. 'Why is she famous?' has an obvious answer: no woman in history has ever been afforded such lavish media coverage. Maybe Diana, Princess of Wales. But we'll save that argument. For now, Kim Kardashian is never out of the media. And we continue to scratch our heads. This is a woman from a family we know about basically from watching them sitting on sofas, eating salads and taking pictures of themselves.

Celebrity culture, as we know it in this century, may be momentary. Our fascination with renown may not last much longer. But there are no signs that it's fading; quite the reverse – new areas of society are being affected. Politics, religion, the arts and public health have all been substantially changed by our unprecedented obsession with the famous. In fact, it's impossible to discern one aspect of culture today that hasn't been affected. We've changed.

Kim Kardashian and her relatives aren't wholly responsible for this, of course. Nor is anyone or anything in particular. Celebrity culture might seem as if it's the result of some playful gods attempting a mischievous experiment. Like the celestial beings in the heavens as visualized in the 1936 Lothar Mendes film of the HG Wells story from 1898, *The Man Who Could Work Miracles*. 'Can't you leave these nasty little creatures alone?' one deity asks another who is looking

down on Earth contemplating and granting humans extraordinary powers. ‘Their lives are so short, their efforts so feeble ... I’m going to give them all power.’

‘What will happen if these silly greedy human scabs who only breed and scramble spread out among our stars?’ asks his divine colleague, who persuades him to limit his gift to a few mortals. He eventually sees sense: ‘They’re all very much alike. I’ll take one, haphazard,’ he declares before delivering the miraculous capability to the eponymous fellow, a Mr. Fotheringay, who is just about to order a pint at his local bar.

In our reimagining, the heavenly benefactor would distribute his largesse to a relatively small number of the weak and pitiful creatures who have done practically nothing to deserve his favor, but suddenly find themselves in possession of near-limitless power and influence over the lives of others, if not quite the supernatural capacities of the film’s hero. The distribution certainly seems as random, indiscriminate or haphazard as the anthropoid god’s selection. Who actually deserves the kind of power enjoyed by celebrities? And I do mean *enjoyed*: while we grow bored of learning of the pressures of being in the public eye, the descent into dependencies on prescription drugs, or booze, the almost obligatory spells in rehab, the struggles with depression, anxiety attacks and other mental illness and the intolerably high expectations that all but force them to undergo repeated plastic surgery, we know that none would dream of swapping life as a celeb for a return to the mundane.

Kim Kardashian has never knowingly complained; she evidently luxuriates in the celebrity lifestyle, availing herself of every conceivable indulgence. She probably hasn’t seen the old film or read Wells’ sci-fi classic, but she must surely feel a bit like Mr. Fotheringay, who discovers to his astonishment that he can wreak brutal retribution on a police officer who upsets

him (sends him to Hell) or even stop the world from spinning. Deeds that are literally impossible become doable at a stroke.

Of course, Fotheringay has no idea what he's done to deserve his superpowers and, though he ruminates about it, the source of them remains mysterious. The source of Kim's superpowers is less arcane, but only slightly less. After all, like Fotheringay, she hasn't actually done anything exceptional, at least nothing so exceptional that it warrants being blessed.

It can appear as if Kim has been favored, like Fotheringay, by the gods. But she has worked cleverly and maybe industriously at attracting the kind of attention from the media that only the likes of Madonna and, before her, Elizabeth Taylor, commanded. Of course, this pair was reliant on traditional media (apologies to Madonna, who is still around and still getting plenty of media attention, but, as we'll discover in Chapter 2, her particular skill was in mesmerizing press and broadcast media). Kim was able to take advantage of Web 2.0, this being the second stage of the development of the internet which allowed user-generated content and the growth of social media – as opposed to the static web pages that appeared before 2005 (the innovation was launched in December 2004 and expanded over the next several years).

A version of celebrity culture had emerged before the interactive internet, of course. Our preoccupation with people who made no material impact on our lives and who had distinguished themselves only by appearing so many times in the media that we felt we knew them preceded Web 2.0 by many years. Yet there was something like a cultural somersault after about 2005 and our fascination turned.

Instead of reading about, looking at and exchanging opinions about people who, for some reason, interested us, we could engage with them. *Engage* is one of the words of our age. Everyone seems to use it and we think they know what it