Blinded by the Stars?
Celebrity, Fantasy, and Desire in Neoliberal Environmental Governance

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Abstract

The growing prominence of celebrities within the global environmental movement—and their power to shape and advance this movement's aims—has been a burgeoning focus of recent research. Thus far, such analysis has viewed the phenomenon primarily through a political economy lens, contending that celebrity is harnessed to further the agenda of a mainstream environmental movement that has become increasingly conjoined with neoliberal capitalism, as expressed in the mounting enthusiasm to address ecological decline through corporate partnership and incentive-based market mechanisms. This presentation draws on psychoanalytic research to offer the complementary suggestion that celebrity also functions as a form of transference helping to sustain the fantasy implicit in this neoliberal vision "that capitalist markets are the answer to their own ecological contradictions" (Büscher 2012:12). Through transference, the charismatic authority conferred to larger-than-life celebrities helps to conceal the gaps between Real and Symbolic in this vision and thus obfuscates contradictions inherent in the execution of neoliberal environmental strategies. From this perspective, cynical suspicion concerning celebrities' authenticity may paradoxically enhance their authority, and thus this analysis helps to explain counterintuitive findings that widespread ambivalence towards celebrities does little to diminish their power to shape public sentiment.

Key Words: celebrity; neoliberalism; environment; cynical reason; disavowal; public secrecy

> "The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled
> to buy and use its products even though they see through them."
> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1998[1944]:167)

Introduction

The growing prominence of celebrities within the public sphere has become a burgeoning focus

of academic analysis (see e.g., Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001; Ferris 2007; Kurzman

et al. 2007; Rickey and Ponte 2011). This research has included study of celebrities' increasing

role within the global environmental movement – and their power to shape and advance this

movement's aims – such that these days every major organization, it seems, either has or is in

search of celebrity representatives to increase its visibility (see esp. Brockington 2008, 2009). A large part of this scholarly attention to celebrity concerns the peculiar "power that fame gives in contemporary society to speak out on all manner of things" (Brockington 2009:11)—most of which have little if any relation to the factors from which a particular celebrity directly derived his or her status (Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Kurzman et al. 2007; Richey and Ponte 2011). As Brockington opines, 'When I read about . . .a debate on more nuclear power stations in Britain, I do not find that the stance of Virginia Westwood (fashion designer) sheds any substantial light on the issue." Yet numerous celebrities, from singer Bono on international development to actor Harrison Ford on environmental conservation, are frequently called upon to express their views on and lend their support to all manner of weighty social issues. West and Orman relate:

> Just because they are entertainment figures with a huge following, interviewers often ask them about the state of world peace, their position on the Middle East, the environment, presidential politics, and so on. This trend to treat celebrities with an unusual amount of deference in public debate has led to an unusual celebrity political system where stars have become major politicos. (2003:116)

The question of why celebrities are able to command this generalized authority is therefore a fascinating one. This question has been addressed in the literature in various ways. As Ferris (2007) describes, the two dominant approaches to the study of celebrity to date have been through the lenses of: 1) pathology; and/or 2) commodification. Within these frames, fascination with celebrity is viewed, alternately, as signifying some type of aberrant psychological condition on the part of fans; or as the function of a capitalist system that that has relentlessly purveyed celebrities as both products for popular consumption and an ideological smokescreen to distract the masses from the system's essentially exploitative and oppressive nature.

In a somewhat different spin, theorists suggest that celebrity fascinates in part because it represents an attempt to resolve contradictions central to a liberal democratic modernity: the persistence of hierarchy within a social structure in which everyone is ostensibly equal and capable of equivalent achievement; the necessity to assume a contrived public persona to succeed in a society ostensibly defined by its quest for authenticity (Marshall 1997; Rojek 2001). In this sense, celebrities are those who have managed to achieve uncommon status and prestige ostensibly through their superior personal (i.e., authentic) qualities, and therefore represent,

paradoxically, the conviction both that everyone can make it and that distinction belongs to those with the uncommon right stuff to claim it.

Likewise, various commentators hold that celebrity represents the persistence of what Weber (1968) called charismatic authority within the context of a modern society that ostensibly sought to eradicate such "irrational" preoccupations in pursuit of a social order founded solely on the basis of Weber's "formal reason" (Marshall 1997; Ferris 2007; Kurzman et al. 2007). In this perspective, fascination with celebrity can be viewed as a quest for continued enchantment— even something of a new religion—in a world where such magical qualities were intended to have been eliminated (Rojek 2001).

Complementing this question of the basis for celebrities' authority, however, is the issue of whether and to what extent audiences actually accept this authority. While relatively little research has addressed this question empirically thus far (Ferris 2007), what research that does exist suggests that popular reception of celebrity tends to be quite ambivalent, combining reverence and ridicule, deference and deprecation (Dyer 1986; Gamson 1994; Marshall 1997; Ferris 2007; Kurzman et al. 2007). As Marshall (1997:x-xi) describes, "In one sense, the celebrity represents success and achievement within the social world," while at the same time "celebrity is ridiculed and derided because it represents the center of false value," signifying "success without the requisite association with work." In this ambivalent imagery, celebrities are viewed as both authentic and inauthentic at once. Gamson's (1994) research concerning reception of celebrity identifies a range of positions fans commonly assume, from wholesale acceptance of celebrities' self-presentation to total disbelief is such representation in terms of which fans' interest derives merely from the pleasure derived in watching the celebrity spectacle unfold. Both of these extreme positions, however, tend to be relatively infrequent, with the majority of fans combining some degree of identification with celebrity and some degree of skepticism as well; they are, Gamson (1994:193) relates, "both cynical and believing."

Such ambivalence in commonly interpreted as evidence that celebrity is not in fact taken overly seriously by the general public and thus that celebrities command less authority than they might were the attention directed to them wholly positive and deferential (Gamson 1994; Ferris 2007; Kurzman et al. 2007; Brockington 2009)—leading Alberoni (1972) to famously pronounce celebrities " a powerless elite." Hence, Brockington cites as evidence of celebrities' relative lack of authority research showing that many celebrity fans

are not at all swayed by the authenticity of the material in front of them. . .They know it is a charade and enjoy pulling to apart. It was reassuring to read Boorstin's condemnation of celebrity's shallowness (written nearly five decades ago) and still find his concerns fresh and contemporary. Despite decades of ever increasing celebrity productivity, our minds have not become dulled into accepting it. (2009:150)

From another perspective, however, this same evidence may be interpreted quite differently. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, contends that the contemporary world increasingly functions in terms of what he, following Sloterdijk (1988), calls "cynical reason." Žižek (himself something of a celebrity academic widely regarded with a similar ambivalence who discusses his own notoriety in cynical fashion) explains:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he nonetheless still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: "they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it." Cynical reason is no longer naïve, but is a paradox of an enlightened false consciousness: one knows the falsehood very well, one is well aware of a particular interest hidden behind an ideological universality, but still one does not renounce it. (1989:25-6).

In terms of this analysis, fans' skepticism concerning celebrities' veracity may paradoxically enhance rather than diminish the latter's authority. As in Horkheimer and Adorno's (1944) classic critique of the culture industry, cited in the epigram, consumers remain compelled by the mystique of celebrity "even though they see through" it. (This is a much more subtle perspective than often attributed to the two theorists, for instance, when Ferris (2007:379), citing evidence of fans' ambivalence towards celebrity, asserts that "the actual consumption of celebrity commodities is far more complex than Adorno and Horkheimer's [sic] 'mass deception' model allows." On the contrary, the philosophers' model takes this very complexity into account in advance.) In this way, as Kurzman and colleagues (2007:353) observe, "publicizing the peccadillos of celebrities seems to help reinforce their celebrity." Or as Gamson (1994:156) puts it, "the sense that 'it's all bullshit' does not disturb involvement."

Understanding how this functions may require delving deeper into Žižek's idiosyncratic psychoanalytic framework merging Marxian and Lacanian perspectives. In what follows, I draw

on Žižek's work to analyze this seemingly ambivalent response to celebrity authority documented by previous research. Within the burgeoning celebrity literature, despite the attention to psychological issues mentioned above, relatively little study has adopted an explicitly psychoanalytic stance (see Marshall 1997; Kapoor 2012 for notable exceptions). This is particularly the case with respect to celebrity environmentalism, where a Marxist approach treating celebrity as a function of capitalist commodification has predominated (Brockington 2009). Rather than addressing the rise of celebrity within the environmental movement as a function of capitalist promotion or the result of pathology on the part of viewers, I contend that a psychoanalytic perspective emphasizing disavowal and cynical reason can do much to illuminate the power of celebrity to influence public sentiment despite ostensive evidence of the general public's skepticism concerning celebrity mystique.

My analysis is largely theoretical, drawing on empirical evidence from previously published research by other investigators to offer a novel perspective on this material. I begin with an overview of Žižek's psychoanalytically-grounded theoretical framework, which has previously been applied to the study of both international development (De vries 2007; Kapoor 2005) and neoliberalism in general (Dean 2007) but never to environmental governance or neoliberal environmentalism in particular (*pace* Fletcher under review). I then apply this framework to an understanding of the celebrity production system, suggesting that fascination with celebrity represents a form of ambivalent transference whereby celebrities' authority is simultaneously legitimated and denigrated in a form of "fetishistic disavowal" (Žižek 1989). Subsequently, I describe how this ambivalence towards celebrity might be viewed as an instance of "public secrecy," drawing on Michael Taussig's (e.g., 1998a, b, 1999) fascinating discussion of this concept. I go on to address what all of this means in terms of celebrity's function vis-à-vis a Marxist perspective emphasizing a conventional understanding of ideology as false consciousness. I apply the analysis to understand the role of celebrity within the environmental movement in particular, drawing on a growing body of research documenting the increasing neoliberalization of environmentalism in the contemporary period, in which celebrities of various types have played an increasingly prominent role. Finally, I discuss the implications of this analysis for future scholarly critique of celebrity in general.

Celebrity, Fantasy, and Desire

Žižek's analysis is grounded in Lacan's famous triad "Real-Symbolic-Imaginary" in which the Real is a placeholder name for that which is beyond signification; it is, as Lacan maintained, "impossible." The Symbolic, meanwhile, is what we commonly call reality, our attempt to represent the Real in discourse and domesticate it through social forms. As an unruly, unsignifiable void, however, the Real inevitably exceeds and subverts such efforts, and thus there is always a gap between Real and Symbolic, a "return of the repressed" that manifests as "symptom." Both symptom and the Symbolic-Real gap it signals, however, are characteristically denied and concealed within the Imaginary, the third element of Lacan's triad, by means of fantasy, which Žižek (1989:132) indeed calls the "screen concealing the gap" between Real and Symbolic. In this sense, "fantasy is a means for an ideology to take its own failure into account in advance" (Žižek 1989:142). Fantasy, and the obfuscation it facilitates, are sustained through desire, pursuit of what Lacan called *jouissance*, usually translated as "enjoyment" but more properly a mixture of pleasure and pain. As such, *jouissance* promises a satisfaction it cannot deliver, which paradoxically stimulates the very desire it fails to satiate by withholding fulfillment and thus compelling a quest for further *jouissance* in pursuit of the satisfaction continually deferred. Hence, Lacan maintained, desire is at root always a desire for desire itself.

In terms of this framework, celebrity would function as part of the fantasy apparatus sustaining the work of the Imaginary to suture the gap between Real and Symbolic representation within a capitalist modernity. By stimulating desire for identification with the ostensibly superior lives and capacities depicted in popular images (themselves a fantastic distortion and charicature, of course, of individuals' lived experience), celebrities serve to legitimate the social order by upholding the myth of equal opportunity for extraordinatry achievement and thereby obscuring the contradiciton, noted above, between the modern ideal of a egalitarian democracy and the reality of persistent hierarchy. As Marshall (1997: x) observes, in this way "the celebrity as public individual who participates openly as a marketable commodity serves as a powerful type of legitimation of the political economic model of exchange and value—the basis of capitalism—and extends that model to include the individual."

The psychological mechanism that most facilitates this dynamic is of course "transference," the process by which the initial authority granted to one's original caregivers is displaced to others later in life (Žižek 2008). For a helplessly dependent infant, the possibility

that the people upon whom one relies for survival might be incapable of effectively supporting one is terrifying, and thus caregivers are unconsciously invested with heroic, larger-than-life status in order to quell this terror and reassure the infant that her or his survival is not in jeopardy. As the subject grows, these same larger-than-life qualities are repeatedly transferred to subsequent authority figures—constituting Lacan's superegoistic Big Other—in the hopes that these can also provide purpose, direction, and order to the universe and thereby dispel one's existential anxiety. As noted above, within modern capitalist society celebrities have come to occupy this status as possessors of a charismatic authority of sorts that is commonly seen to derive not from their structural role but from inherent personal characteristics, in line with modernity's emphasis on individuality conceived as a unique and stable essence (see Marshall 1997).

As with most authority relationships, rather than a wholesale deference the authority invested in celebrities appears largely ambivalent, in that celebrities' capacity to command authority is simultaneously affirmed and negated. This is hardly surprising, for if one's relationship with initial caregivers was itself ambivalent, as is commonly the case, all subsequent authority figures are likely to be viewed in similar manner. This ambivalence suggests that celebrity authority is commonly characterized by what Žižek calls "fetishistic disavowal," a simultaneous admission and denial that equivocates according to the formula: "I know very well, but still..." (1989:12). This is of, course, the very dynamic illustrated in Horkheimer and Adorno's characterization of the culture industry's advertising power cited in the epigram.

Celebrity as Public Secrecy
All of this helps to explain Gamson's observations concerning the celebrity system's resilience to exposure of the commercial machinations by which it is produced. The conventional wisdom holds:

> For manipulation to be most effective, evidence of its presence should be
> nonexistent. When the manipulated believe things are the way they are naturally and
> inevitably, manipulation is successful. In short, manipulation requires a false reality
> that is in continuous denial of its existence. (Schiller, cited in Gamson 1994:142).

Yet Gamson (1994) observes time and again that in fact evidence of manipulation and artifice in the production of celebrity does not always undermine the system's power and authority; indeed,

such revelation may actually enhance celebrities' allure. As he describes, the celebrity production system in fact appears to continually publicize the very means of its own production, exposing the ostensive secrets of its manufacture and the fact that it self-consciously seeks to seduce fans with its constructed images. In short, Gamson describes,

> Manipulation, machinery, marketing, illicit means, public-relations techniques, false sincerity, manufactured spontaneity, backstage rehearsals, and the staging of the self are all very present in the celebrity text, alongside the dominant myth of celebrity as merited by exceptional conduct or internal qualities. Yet there is no evidence of malaise in the celebrity system, no evidence of audience disengagement. (1994:144)

As a result, he concludes:

> Celebrity as a prestige system, as a hierarchy, depends on the continual exposure of its inverse: the system that transforms ordinary people by blatant artifice. "Once the techniques of establishing awe and mystification are opened to the public," one might reasonably expect, "the mystification is undermined." Yet quite the opposite is true. (1994:171)

All of this calls to mind Taussig's analysis of what he calls "public secrecy," defined as "that which is generally known but not generally articulated" (1998a:246). In other words, a public secret is something that is commonly recognized but which assumes an aura of secrecy due to the fact that those involved maintain the sense that there is in fact something hidden. It is, Taussig (1992:132) describes, a "magnificent deceit in whose making all members of a society, so it would seem, conspire." Taussig maintains that public secrets are pervasive, that "all institutions breed such secrecy" (1998b:226), and indeed that "without such shared secrets any and all social institutions . . . would founder" (1999:7). Taussig's concept has been applied to analysis of a wide variety of social processes (e.g., Watts 2001; Fletcher 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012), and as I describe elsewhere (Fletcher 2012), the concept is remarkably similar to analytics advanced by a number of other theorists, suggesting the presence of a general social phenomenon.

In Taussig's analysis, the peculiar thing about a public secret is that it tends to defy exposure. In fact, he suggests, the "secret" is commonly reinforced by such exposure, and thus he concludes that "part of secrecy is secreting" and that "exposure is precisely what the secret intends" (1998: 242). In other words, Taussig (1999:216) explains, public secrecy seems to have

"built-in protection against exposure because exposure, or at least a certain modality of exposure, is what, in fact, it thrives upon." Exposure of what is already known paradoxically reinforces the sense that there is in fact something concealed when in fact, Taussig (1999:216) intimates, the "real" "secret" of the public secret is that "there is none."

Gamson's observation concerning the celebrity system's reliance on "continual exposure" of "blatant artifice" seems to conform to this characterization. In this frame, then, celebrity in general could be viewed as a pubic secret in that most fans recognizes to some degree that the status is contrived yet maintain the fiction that there is something substantial to it as well. As noted earlier, the mechanism that maintains this paradox is disavowal—a simultaneous admission and denial—and as I describe elsewhere (Fletcher under review), there is in fact strong resonance between Žižek's analysis of this phenomenon and Taussig's discussion of pubic secrecy, similarly described as an "active not-knowing" or "knowing what not to know" (Taussig 1999:7,6). This disavowal of celebrity artifice appears to be reinforced, as in public secrecy in general, through the very exposure of this artifice that is, as Gamson describes, intrinsic to the celebrity production system itself.

Such disavowal is aided by a further dynamic with echoes of Taussig's public secrecy (see Fletcher 2012): the concept of "staged authenticity" advanced by Dean MacCannell (1999). In MacCannell's analysis, staged authenticity describes the self-conscious construction of a "front stage" performance or setting explicitly designed to appear as an intimate, spontaneous "backstage" encounter in order to satisfy the audience's desire to move beyond the public façade and experience the ostensibly genuine reality lying behind. While the concept was originally applied to tourism, more recently MacCannell (2008a) has described its contemporary proliferation through a variety of social forms. Others have accused MacCannell of using the staged authenticity concept to adjudicate the veracity of phenomena, yet MacCannell himself clearly intended the concept to collapse the distinction between real and false entirely, as he has recently sought to clarify (MacCannell 2008b). Like a public secret, then, staged authenticity implies that there is "*nothing* in the *back* except a fantasy of fulfillment and some clever or funky arrangements to service that fantasy" (MacCannell 2008b:337, emphasis in original).

The dynamics of celebrity resonate with this analysis as well. As noted earlier, most celebrity fans are far from naïve dupes but are commonly quite skeptical concerning the veracity of celebrity presentations, keenly concerned to distinguish the true from the false and expose

constructed artifice where they find it (Gamson 1994). As a result, those involved in celebrity production must produce staged authenticity as well, and hence, Gamson (1994:48) relates, "Many texts have brought to fruition the behind-the-scenes, inside-dope style begun earlier, instructing the reader further in reading performances, finding the 'real' behind the 'image.'" As one of Gamson's journalist informants admits (in an seemingly candid interview that may itself indicate staged authenticity),

> What happens as the audience gets savvier is that you write savvier stories. You
> write stories in which you incorporate the public machinery into the story. You write
> about how the star didn't show up and the publicist was biting their nails or you
> write about the negotiating process to get the star. (in Gamson 1994:121)

In such presentations, the ostensive backstage process of story composition becomes part of the story itself, a paradigmatic example of staged authenticity in action. Exposure of certain aspects of the celebrity production system paradoxically enhance the mystique of the system as a whole, evoking the idea that such exposure portends further obfuscation and thus preserving, as Taussig (1998a:247) describes, the "receding shadow of the real in all its perfection." In other words, "Armed with evidence from both stories, audiences tend to use artificiality and the undeserving to reinforce the deserving and the natural" (Gamson 1994:166). Or as Baudrillard (1994:12, 13) observes of the precession of simulacra—yet another concept akin to public secrecy (see Fletcher 2012)—the self-conscious presentation of one dynamic "as imaginary" encourages one to "believe that the rest is real," helping to "rejuvenate the fiction of the real in the opposite camp." In this way, disavowal is sustained and the public secret reinforced.

Celebrity as Enlightened False Consciousness?

All of this, of course, helps to sustain the cynical distance by means of which the ideology of celebrity is sustained. Self-conscious exposure of artifice places audiences at a certain remove from identification with celebrity, allowing them to believe that they have not been wholly taken in. Yet of course this staged exposure is itself an integral part of the contemporary celebrity production process. As Gamson (1994:49) observes, "An ironic, winking tone in. . .relevatory texts is one of the clearest developments in the latter part of the twentieth century," via which "[t[he audience has been invited to take its power further with a new, cynical distance from the production of celebrity and celebrity images." In this spirit, "New-style stars flaunt and celebrate

stardom by mocking it, camping it up, or underplaying it. . .The star now stands apart from glamour, and comments (ironically) on it" (Gitlin 1989:G14).

Yet as intimated at the outset, such cynical distance does not necessarily diminish celebrity's power to captivate and persuade but may conversely enhance it. In this way celebrity, like television in general,

> seems to flatter the inert skepticism of its own audience, assuring them that they can do no better than to stay right where they are, rolling their eyes in feeble disbelief. . .[The] TV viewer does not gaze up at the screen with angry scorn or piety, but— perfectly enlightened—looks down on its images with a nervous sneer which cannot threaten them and which only keeps the viewer himself from standing up. (Miller 1988:16,331)

Similarly, Sloterdijk (1988) describes cynical reason as promoting an "enlightened false consciousness" in which subjects, as Žižek paraphrases, "know very well what they are doing" but feel compelled to do it anyway. This suggests a more nuanced understanding of the nature of ideology than that advanced by many in the orthodox Marxist tradition. As E.P. Thompson (1993:87) characterizes it, Marxists commonly describe ideology as a form of false consciousness that obscures the true nature of reality by imposing "an all-embracing domination upon the ruled. .reaching down to the very threshold of their experience, and implanting within their minds at birth categories of subordination they are powerless to correct." Yet in Žižek's (1989:15) framework, on the contrary, ideology is "not simply a 'false consciousness,' an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as 'ideological.'" Hence, in opposition to Marxist orthodoxy, Žižek, echoing Sloterdijk, contends that in fact "an ideological identification exerts a hold on us precisely when we are aware that we are not fully identical to it" (1997:21). In this way," ideology can lay its cards on the table, reveal the secret of its functioning, and still continue to function" (Taylor 2010:62).

This suggests a more subtle approach to understanding the nature of the power commanded by celebrities as well. The orthodox Marxists' false consciousness is essentially Lukes' (1974) classic "third dimensional" model of power, in wich influence is seen as exercised not merely through causing one's own interests to prevail (the first dimension) nor in controlling the framework in which outcomes are debated (the second dimension) but through compelling stakeholders to pursue illusory ends in opposition ot their "true interests" as well. Žižek's

characterization of ideology as constitutive of reality itself suggests a view of power more akin to Foucault's (1977:194) own well-known characterization, advanced explicitly in opposition to a conventional Marxist perspective, as something that does not merely "mask" or "conceal" but rather "produces reality, it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth." Even more so, however, Žižek's perspective suggests that what power produces is less a wholesale identification with constructed reality than an ambivalent distance in which ostensive cynicism concerning the veracity of the construction belies a disavowed, largely unconscious submission to the artifice nonetheless. This, as contended above, likely assumes the form of a public secret, which, Taussig (1999:6,3) provocatively asserts, "lies at the core of power," and beside which "[w]hat we call doctrine, ideology, consciousness, beliefs, values and even discourse, pale into sociological insignificance."

The Work of Celebrity in the Age of Neoliberal Environmental Governance
Researchers have observed that the growing prominence of celebrity resonates with and supports a general process of neoliberalization in various ways. First, in its close association with the rise of philanthrocapitalism (Bishop and Green 2008), celebrity helps to legitimate a paradigmatically neoliberal approach to governance emphasizing businesses' capacity to self-regulate in the absence of substantial state oversight via so-called "corporate social responsibility" strategies (Holmes 2012; Kapoor 2012). Celebrities also help to sell (often literally through their corporate endorsement contracts) the idea intrinsic to this neoliberal approach that individuals can contribute to social causes primarily through "ethical" consumption of ostensibly socially and environmentally sustainable commodities rather than direct political engagement (Carrier 2010). Further, celebrities contribute to legitimating the spectacular rise of private philanthropy efforts on the part of wealthy individuals (see Kapoor 2012), a movement that both promotes neoliberalism in championing its "private visions of the public good" (Raddon, 2008: 38) and which has itself been increasingly neoliberalized over the past decade in seeking to restructure itself on the model of the market in the interest of enhanced "efficiency" (Holmes 2012).

Meanwhile, a rapidly growing body of literature has documented the myriad ways is which environmental policy and practices around the world have become increasingly neoliberalized over the past several decades. To date, most of this literature has addressed its subject matter

from a predominantly Marxist perspective, viewing neoliberalism as a capitalist process and hence analyzing the ways in which environmental initiatives have become implicated in processes of commodification and financialization associated with the strategy of 'accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey 2005) by means of which neoliberal policies serve to amass wealth in the hands of what Sklair (2001) calls the "transnational capitalist class" (see e.g., Heynen et al. 2007; Brockington et al. 2008; Castree 2008; Brockington and Duffy 2010; Büscher et al. 2012; cf. Oels 2005; Fletcher 2010b). From this perspective, neoliberal theory functions predominantly as an ideological smokescreen, concealing the myriad ways in which unsavory aspects of this process (e.g., large-scale displacement of resource-dependent peoples in favor of corporate interests, the widespread failure of market-based environmental mechanisms to achieve intended aims) via an obfuscating rhetoric quick to proclaim "win-win" outcomes simultaneously sustaining the "triple bottom line" of "people, planet, and profits." In this analysis, celebrity endorsement of environmental causes serves to support this obfuscation, distracting audiences from such underlying problems and helping to legitimate by association the big environmental nongovernmental organizations (BINGOs) that increasingly function like corporations both in their courtship of private sector resources and in their implementation of neoliberal market-based projects and programs (see Brockington 2008, 2009; Sullivan 2011). In this sense, celebrity endorsement is understood as part of the process through which nonhuman nature is transformed into Spectacle via aestheticized, hyperreal imagery (Brockington 2009; Igoe 2010; Igoe et al. 2010) within a neoliberal era in which capitalism seeks to internalize natural resources as an integral component of production—what O'Connor (1994) calls capitalism's "ecological phase"—rather than externalizing them in order to maximize short term profit, the dominant strategy prior.

The psychoanalytic-inspired analysis presented above offers an alternative, yet complementary reading of this trend. Rather than viewing it as the ideological obfuscation of an underlying economic process of capital accumulation, in this lens neoliberal theory could be understood as a fantasy helping to conceal the gap between the actual function and effects of neoliberal policies and their Symbolic representation vis-à-vis the pervasive win-win rhetoric previously described (see Fletcher under review). Hence, Dean describes neoliberalism as championing a "fantasy of free trade" that

covers over persistent market failure, structural inequalities, the violence of privatization, and the redistribution of wealth to the "have mores." Free trade sustains at the level of fantasy what it seeks to avoid at the level of reality—namely actually free trade among equal players, that is equal participants with equal opportunities to establish the rules of the game, access information, distribution, and financial networks, etc. (2008:55).

With respect to environmental governance, the effect of this is to sustain "the paradoxical idea that capitalist markets are the answer to their own ecological contradictions" (Büscher 2012:12). In service to this fantasy, celebrity promotion helps to mobilize affect and desire in support of environmental causes, focusing attention on splashy, sensation-filled spectacle supporting the win-win narrative (Brockington 2009) and thereby conjuring an aura of environmentalism "as exciting, exotic, erotic, and glamorous—as 'sexy'" (Sullivan 2011:335).

As Dean (2008) points out, it is of course desire that sustains neoliberalism's free trade fantasy: desire on the part of neoliberal advocates to see the theory fuction as envisioned; and desire on the part of those excluded from neoliberalism's benefits to finally receive the material rewards perennially dangled in front of them. De vries (2007) identifies this latter fuction of desire in international development policy, wherein the masses excluded from the fruits of development nevertheless sustain faith in development's potential due to their desire to receive the benefits (i.e., projects, public works, etc.) they have long been promised by planners. In this dynamic, the gap between promise and fulfillment of neoliberal fantasies is itself concealed through further fantasies assuring satisfaction at some future juncture, once the proper adjustments have been made to finally "get the market right." With respect to celebrity, observing the glamorous, larger-than-life personas, lifestyles, and seemingly heroic acts of altruistic charity performed by environmental celebrities offers a similar *jouissance*, providing just enough pleasure to keep viewers hooked yet constantly deferring an implied fulfillment, in part through ostentatious revelation of the artificiality of these aestheticized representations themselves.

Conclusion

In the above, I have tried to complicate the growing celebrity literature by addressing the intriguing question of why celebrities are increasingly able to command authority to address

weighty social and political issues that have little if any relation to the achievements responsible for their celebrity status in the first place. In contrast to previous research, I have suggested that evidence that the general public tends to regard celebrities ambivalently, lauding and disparaging them in equal measure, may signify less a diminishment of celebrity authority than an enlightened false consciousness by means of which this authority is paradoxically enhanced through the contradictory function of cynical reason. The result, I suggested, may be the creation of a public secret, wherein all are aware to some extent that celebrity is largely illusory, self-consciously manufactured via a capitalist production process yet all maintain the fiction that there is in fact something deeper, something intrinsic and magical, to celebrity as well, emanating not from a publicity machine but from celebrities' innate charismatic qualities. As a result, public disclosure concerning the artifice of the celebrity production process, as Gamson (1994) among others observes, does not negate but on the contrary commonly augments public veneration for the "celebretariat" (Rojek 2001) as a whole. Within the global environmental movement, this has lead to an increasing emphasis on celebrity advocacy to help sustain the neoliberal fantasy that capitalist market mechanisms can solve the very social and ecological problems to which these mechanisms themselves contribute.

All of this, I suspect, has intriguing implications for scholarly analysis of celebrity in general. One of many critics' central concerns points to the disturbing potential of celebrity spectacle to impede the democratic process by distracting citizens from important issues of contention. As Gamson (1994:191) describes, "Critics have warned that these practices pose dangers to informed participation in decisions that matter, that democratic choice requires authentic voices." From this perspective, evidence that fans regard celebrity ambivalently is interpreted as demonstrating that such concerns may be exaggerated, as per Brockington's (2009:150) comment, cited at the outset, that it "reassuring" to learn that audiences "are not at all swayed by the authenticity" of celebrity performance. Similarly, Gamson (1994:1919) opines, "Some comfort can be taken from the fact that the takeover is never complete, and the conquering armies, as we have seen, are wracked with internal conflict." In this spirit, much scholarly analysis, from Boorstin (1961) to the present (e.g., Richey and Ponte 2011), has sought to further undermine the authenticity of the celebrity spectacle by exposing new aspects of its production and the underlying realities that it helps to obfuscate.

The analysis presented here, however, suggests that fans' ambivalence may not signal diminishment of celebrity influence, with ostensive exposure of celebrity manufacture at times paradoxically reinforcing the obfuscation it endeavors to dispel. Like journalists' public revelations concerning the backstage of celebrity production, academics' own critiques of this process may enhance the very public secret they seek to expose. This analysis might be taken one step further, in that lamentation concerning the threat to participatory democracy posed by celebrity spectacle might serve a similar function, helping to "reveal" the "false," passive involvement encouraged by celebrity voyeurism and thus reinforcing, a lá Baudrillard, the conviction that there is in fact a "real," functional democratic process out there somewhere, as Taussig describes, in the ever-receding beyond.

Be that as it may, my analysis suggests that a different approach to addressing these issues might prove more fruitful. As Žižek, echoing Taussig, explains of the implications of Lacan's perspective concerning effective strategies of social critique:

> we must avoid the simple metaphors of demasking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality. We can see why Lacan, in his Seminar on *The Ethic of Psychoanalysis,* distances himself from the liberating gesture of saying finally that "the emperor has no clothes." (1989:25)

Rather, Zizek asserts, the aim of critique must be "to detect, in a given ideological edifice, the element which represents within it its own impossibility" (1989:143), to undertake a "symptomal reading" that seeks to "to discern the unavowed bias of the official text via its ruptures, blanks, and slips" (1997:10). As Kapoor (2005:1205) paraphrases, "this means tracking and identifying ideology's Real—its slips, disavowals, contradictions, ambiguities." Hopefully, this analysis has provided a productive point of departure for envisioning what such an approach to celebrity critique, in environmental governance as well as other arenas, might look like.

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