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Spectacle or Respectable?: Gendered Constructions of Fame in the Bling Ring and Hustle & Flow

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Spectacle or Respectable?:
Gendered Constructions of Fame in *The Bling Ring* and *Hustle & Flow*

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Spectacle or Respectable?:

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
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Spectacle or Respectable?: Gendered Constructions of Fame in *The Bling Ring* and *Hustle & Flow*

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Marlia Banning

This thesis argues that the turn of the most recent century saw the emergence of a performative turn in fame. I argue that before this turn there was a necessity for famous people to possess what I term a discrete performative act. While many celebrities retain such acts, the performative turn has made it possible to achieve celebrity status on the basis of what I term stylized performances of life wherein a life is itself performed and offered up for consumption. I argue that such a style of fame is feminine fame, as opposed to masculine fame which is derived from discrete performative acts. Feminine fame may be said to be rooted in spectacle. I undertake rhetorical criticism of two films, *The Bling Ring* and *Hustle & Flow*, to discover how they construct feminine and masculine fame respectively. I find that through *The Bling Ring* feminine fame is constructed as something that is desired in response to a cultural construction of fame as something one lacks. Fame is thus imbued, from this perspective, with inherent value. Feminine fame is furthermore shown to entail self-commodification. Those who desire such fame must make themselves spectacle and offer themselves up for consumption. Employed in this self-commodification are both various technologies of glamour and social media. *Hustle & Flow*, by contrast, constructs masculine fame as something that possesses instrumental value. It is through the acquisition of masculine fame that one may acquire for themselves a better life and prove their merit. Masculine fame proves merit because it is rooted in discrete performative acts,
which are framed as both respectable and important. Masculine fame is further framed by the film as an endeavor that is of such importance that is justifies the subordination of the fame-seeker’s associates, and particularly women. Masculine fame is shown to depend largely on the reduction of women to spectacle. This thesis finally considers masculine and feminine fame each to be responses to different democratizations of fame that have occurred, and been contested, throughout the institution’s history.
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Chapter 1: Towards a Performative Turn in Fame

Within contemporary Western culture there is a perhaps unrivaled and unprecedented emphasis on and obsession with fame. The evidence of such a claim is readily accessible; a quick survey of our sources of entertainment is certainly suggestive. Forms of entertainment are increasingly and self-consciously engaging fame as a cultural value. The television show *Glee* has become a bona fide cultural phenomenon and features a sizable number of characters who claim fame as their goal. Fox, the network that airs *Glee*, has described the show as being about underdogs discovering their potential as stars (Wood & Baughman, 2012, p. 330). Lady GaGa has become, perhaps, the defining pop star of the current generation and has done so by pushing the quest for fame to the center of her art; her first album and EP are titled *The Fame* and *The Fame Monster* respectively. Queer theorist J. Jack Halberstam (2013) notes this fame-centric aspect of her persona, claiming her feminism to be a politics that emphasizes “meditations on fame” and calling her Warholesque in her love of attention (p. 5).

Far from being relegated to entertainment realms, however, celebrity is an oft-utilized resource across all of contemporary life. Celebrities have been recognized as playing an “increasingly important role in…creating and enhancing” the “image and equity” of corporate brands as their products become increasingly “difficult to differentiate” without such assistance (Choi & Rifon, 2012, p. 639). Politics as well has become increasingly driven by celebrity. The famous carry with them “a public stature acquired from appearance in mass media and other performative realms” that can be utilized to bring both recognition and legitimacy to political causes (Simonson, 2001, p. 414). Such actions contribute to a celebrity culture which “blurs the boundary between news and entertainment” (Inthorn & Street, 2011, p. 479) and while it is true
that celebrities have long been politically active agents (Becker, 2013, p. 1), the phenomenon has been recognized as growing (Marsh, Hart, & Tindall, 2010, p. 322).

The importance of fame appears to be inescapable. Importantly, as fame becomes increasingly present in the realms of entertainment, business, and politics it is simultaneously becoming less removed from the experience of everyday life. Reality television is a thriving genre of television programming that has pushed the relationship between celebrity culture and ordinary people to the forefront of television (Holmes, 2004, p. 113). In the wake of the genre’s emergence as a commercial force there has been an increasing demand for “ordinary people desiring celebritification” (Turner, 2006, p. 155). It is “the spectacle of ‘everyday life’” (Turner, 2004, p. 85) upon which the genre is built.

Given the fetishization of the ordinary and the everyday in such a prominent genre of entertainment it is perhaps unsurprising that celebrity has undertaken a “colonization of the expectations of everyday life in contemporary western societies” (Turner, 2006, p. 153). Products are sold alongside the idea that their purchase may allow the consumer to “feel a little of what it [is] like to be a star” (Holmes & Redmond, 2006, p. 122). Fame is increasingly being consumed in venues, like gossip magazines, that provide consumers with “the images of stars and celebrities” as guides for crafting their own image (Wilson, 2010, p. 35).

As the importance of fame soars it is unsurprising to observe a corresponding increase in its seeking. Media scholar Nick Couldry (2012) has posited that celebrity is paramount to the extent that those who do not possess it feel an imperative to acquire presence in the media; such presence has been constructed as a lack, demanding satisfaction (p. 93). The prevalence of fame-seeking may also be emerging from other corners of culture as well. American author Jake Halpern (2007), for instance, has suggested that the education system itself is fostering fame-
seeking. He argues that that as public education pushes students towards the acquisition of higher self-esteem they may also be “inadvertently bolstering [a] narcissism” that sends students on quests for fame (p. 38).

It is evident that fame is a modern fixation. Against the backdrop described thus far it becomes only logical that increasing numbers of people view fame as a viable option for themselves (J. Gountas, S. Gountas, Reeves & Moran, 2012, p. 680; Turner, 2006, p. 156). It has been estimated that four million adults in the United States have fame as their stated goal (Brim, 2009, p. 1). As fame has become an obsession, its pursuit has become increasingly commonplace, and it is such pursuits with which this project is concerned.

What is particularly interesting about this development is that the methods of fame-seeking have greatly expanded over the past two decades. As this introductory chapter will argue, it has become increasingly viable to pursue and achieve fame that is rooted primarily in a more general form of *stylized performances of life* which wield strong rhetorical force. Celebrity can in fact be achieved and maintained exclusively through such performances. Such fame-seeking performances are a major concern of this project.

This project more specifically seeks to establish some of the guiding principles of this type of fame. As I will argue, fame built on these performances is an endeavor that is highly gendered and can be viewed as *feminine fame*. I seek to articulate what comprises such fame and differentiates it from *masculine fame*. To this end, I will be conducting rhetorical criticism of two films, *The Bling Ring* and *Hustle & Flow*, which depict narratives of fame-seeking that operate along gendered lines. The former will be interrogated as a depiction of feminine fame, rooted in stylized performances of life rather than *discrete performative acts*, while the latter will be treated as the inverse: a depiction of masculine fame that relies on discrete performative acts.
This chapter will proceed in the following manner. I will begin by consulting relevant literatures to establish the ways in which fame has become increasingly performative and the ways in which this evolution has transpired along gendered lines. Upon completing this survey I will more thoroughly introduce my chosen method of analysis, and outline the specific ways in which it will be employed throughout this proposed project. In this section I will further speak to my motivation in selecting the particular artifacts that will be discussed. I will finally conclude with an overview of the chapters that will follow.

**Literature Review**

The primary purpose of this literature review is to establish that fame has, over the course of the 20th century and into the 21st century, become an increasingly performative endeavor. I will introduce the notion that this evolution culminated in a highly gendered early 21st century *performative turn* in fame. This proposition is not intended to suggest that at any particular moment a performative element was introduced to fame. Indeed fame has a long and storied relationship with performance. The work of this section, then, is to consult the relevant literature in order to chart a trajectory of the changes that have occurred in this relationship that have rendered the study of gendered fame-seeking performances particularly fruitful, especially given their noted rise in prevalence. To begin this undertaking I will first carve out more precisely what is entailed by the claim that fame has become increasingly tied to stylized performances of life.

**Fame and Performance**

For the purposes of this project the extent to which fame is performative is the extent to which it is independent of any discrete performative act. The notion of the discrete performative act is crucial to the work being done here and as such this section of the review will serve to carve out a working definition of the term. With this work done I will then be able to explore the
ways in which fame has come to be, in many instances, less reliant on such acts and adopted a a more generally performative bent.

Daniel Boorstin (1975) is one of the most widely recognized scholars to weigh in on modern celebrity. He famously claimed that the modern celebrity “is a person who is known for his well-knownness,” “fabricated on purpose” by various media, and a replacement for those “known for some serious achievement” (p. 57-59). The concept of the discrete performative act first came to my attention by way of media scholar Christopher E. Bell’s (2010) response to Boorstin’s famous claim.

Bell does not go as far as to attempt a full scale refutation of Boorstin’s claim. What he does do is point to a particularly visible shortcoming; even four decades after the claim was first made there are still those celebrities who have risen to prominence due to “some performative act” (p. 1). To ground this idea he lists examples of those who have risen to fame in this way as well as their corresponding performative act. This list includes Michael Jordan, Slash and Denzel Washington for their abilities in sport, music and acting respectively (p. 1). What is important to note about this list is that each of the abilities that he refers to can be bracketed, that is, they have a distinct beginning and ending. You can watch Michael Jordan make an awesome move on the court, you can see Slash’s impressive solos and with Denzel Washington you can refer to any number of specific film performances.

From this observation Bell proceeds to make the unpersuasive claim that such figures stand in contrast to people like Paris Hilton because celebrities of her ilk have acquired fame “without actually doing anything” (p. 1). It is clear that what he means by such a statement is that Hilton and her contemporaries have acquired fame without an accompanying “performative act” (p. 1) that can be clearly demarcated as having a beginning and an ending. Thus a more accurate
rendering of his claim would be to say that some people acquire fame without engaging in *discrete* performative acts.

Clearly it is nonsensical to argue that there is no performative element to Paris Hilton’s fame! It is inherently a performative act to offer oneself up as a “tourist sight” for public consumption (Hillyer, 2010, p. 20). What distinguishes a figure like Hilton from a figure like Denzel Washington is not that one performs and the other does not; it is instead that one’s performances take place in magazines under the guise of life and the other’s on movie screens, sports fields, and other sites of celebrity performance.

This observation informs the present claim that fame has become increasingly performative. Fame has evolved to a point where those celebrities whose fame is derived from discrete performative acts exist alongside those whose fame is derived from more generally offering their lives up as performance and spectacle. To say that fame has become more performance-oriented is to say that fame has become increasingly available to those who may not have or be primarily known for a discrete performative act. To merely claim that fame has come to be given to those who perform more generally is, however, unsatisfying. To fully understand what the present claim entails it is necessary to bring the idea of more generally performance-oriented fame into sharper focus.

Figures like Hilton can be best described as engaging in stylized performances of life. The term stylized performance was first introduced to me through the work of linguistics scholar David West Brown (2008). Brown undertook an exploration of the prefix celebu- and in his work traces something of a genealogy of its proliferation in popular culture. A key term that involves said prefix is *celebutante* and he thus spends a substantial portion of his work charting to historical uses of the word. It is in this discussion that he employs the term in question.
In discussing the 1980s “‘club kid’ community” he referred to its members as gaining “recognition…from their stylized performances” (p. 315). It is his only use of the phrase, and he does not labor over any sort of definition, however, I was nonetheless struck by how general his description of their fame was. It was this encounter that provided significant clarity for me in regards to the evolutions occurring in modern fame. I began to ask myself precisely what stylized performances entailed; stylized performances of what? The closest Brown comes to quantifying the term is in mentioning that the club kids’ stylized performances included their “style, drug use, and sexuality” (p. 315). Such a description did not provide a satisfactory answer to my query. It soon became apparent, however, that the answer was indeed life itself.

The people about whom Brown writes were actively spinning commodities out of their lives and their selves, making them available to the public for consumption. In exchange for this offering they were receiving a specific kind of celebrity, one granted independent of any discrete performative act. A Newsweek article from 1985 describes the antics of these club kids as an attempt to “win the approval of full-fledged downtown celebrities” (as cited in Brown, 2008, p. 315). Such an observation lends an important insight; that stylized performances are patently rhetorical.

These club kids were, as Erving Goffman (1956) says, mobilizing their actions “so that [they] will convey an impression” that is advantageous to their particular ends (p. 3). These particular presentations of self wield rhetorical force because they are, in the manner described by Kenneth Burke (1969), pursuing a particular kind of identification. The efforts of these club kids to win the approval of more established celebrities can be viewed as a request for consubstantiality with them. Consubstantiality is a concept developed by Burke to portray the ways in which, despite being avowedly separate entities, people come to be identified as being
alike or of a similar type (p. 20-21). These fame-seeking club kids sought to “identify A [themselves] with B [the already famous]” (p. 21).

It is clear, then, that these performances are rhetorical because, as Burke states, we find ourselves “clearly in the region of rhetoric when considering the identifications whereby a specialized activity makes one a participant in some social or economic class” (p. 27-28). Given that included within these performances were the performers’ “style, drug use, and sexuality” (Brown, 2008, p. 315) it is evident that we are dealing with elements that extend past the discursive. Such elements, however, are fair game for consideration given the noted expansion of rhetoric to include the ways in which “we communicate with our entire bodies and of the use of signs more generally” (Gencarella & Pezzullo, 2010, p. 1).

At this point it is evident that fame can be generally performative. More concretely stated it is evident that fame detached from discrete performative acts occurs. What replaces the discrete performative act as a means to acquire fame in such scenarios are stylized, rhetorical performances of life. We have thus established that such a phenomenon is indeed possible. However, to approach studying these performances productively it is important to meet a more rigorous standard than mere possibility. The next section of this literature review will thus establish such a standard, demonstrating that this possibility has come to be frequently practiced.

Towards a Performative Turn

The practice of giving of stylized performances is, of course, far from revolutionary. The institution of celebrity has long relied on such performances. What constitutes a performative turn in fame is that over the course of the 20th century and the opening stretches of the 21st century it has become increasingly viable to achieve fame solely by means of stylized
performances of life, untethered to discrete performative acts. In many ways such a performative turn is merely a return to the mode of operation witnessed in the earliest forms of fame.

The monetary success of celebrities in 20th century fame has tended to be viewed as a reward reaped by the celebrity because of their hard work and talent (Sternheimer, 2011, p.200). This, however, has not always been the case. Far from being resultant from fame, wealth, prior to the 17th century, was instead a prerequisite for celebrity. To be a celebrity it was necessary for people to have the resources to allow control regarding who they were seen by and how (Gamson, 2007, p. 142). Thus in this period fame consisted of carefully manipulated public images or, in the terminology of this project, stylized performances of life.

The late sixteenth century saw various technologies and arts like printing and portraiture become increasingly accessible to larger segments of the population. With this development fame was “gradually detached from an aristocratic social status” and came to be viewed as “the personal possession of any worthy individual” (Gamson, 2007, p. 143). With the “aristocracy’s virtual monopoly on fame and honor” crumbling claims to fame became less dependent on wealth and could indeed be made on the basis of artistry and achievement (Braudy, 1986, p. 387).

In the 20th century claims to fame were still very much so rooted in claims of merit (Dyer, 2006, p. 157). Despite this, however, there was still a necessity to engage in stylized performances of life because audience interest was not limited to the discrete performative acts of the famous. The public has long had a simultaneous interest in the lives of the stars. As early as the 1940s the private lives of celebrities were being offered up as spectacle to the extent that the majority of what was written about them “reported on their private lives, personal habits, tastes, and romances” (Gamson, 2007, p. 146). Often such reporting has involved
celebrities inviting reporters, as proxies for the public, into their homes and private lives with the goal of establishing particular images or personae (Gamson, 2007, p. 148-149). It is this goal that allows us to see such events as instances of stylized performances of life with rhetorical force; stars attempted to present themselves to public in particular manners which fostered “a greater sense of connection and intimacy” between themselves and their public (Gamson, 2007, p. 146).

While the importance of stylized performance in such scenarios is unavoidable, it is evident that at this moment a performative turn in fame has still not yet transpired in full. Many 20th century celebrities engaged in similar practices. Further, 20th century celebrities routinely practiced self-commodification to equip themselves to give particular performances. They have done so with the extensive assistance of multiple parties, including designers, hair and makeup people, coaches and instructors of fitness, music and dance, and a litany of others. With great help, “star image[s]” have long been crafted for the famous (Dyer, 2007, p. 86).

These actions must be viewed as a push towards a performative turn and not as comprising such a turn for one important reason: such actions were undertaken in service of other commodities (Dyer, 2007, p. 86). That these commodities were almost uniformly records of discrete performative acts, like films and records, further illustrates the continued importance of such acts. Stylized performances were necessary but not sufficient for fame; they remained tethered to discrete performative acts.

The decentering of the discrete performative act is the necessary precondition of proclaiming a performative turn to have transpired in modern fame. Two crucial moments over the course of the 20th century helped achieve such a decentering. The first occurred in the 1970s.

The 1970s saw the rise to prominence of publications like People and The National Enquirer. These publications are emblematic of journalism’s move towards focusing on the
private lives of public figures (Petersen, 2011, p. 132) and provide the backdrop against which
celebrities became “known for themselves rather than for their actions” (Gamson, 2007, p.150). This trend continued unabated into the 1990s, a decade which represents another crucial moment in the push towards fame’s performative turn.

One of the most important developments seen in this decade was the increased public fixation on celebrity fashion. Celebrity fashion has long been of interest to the public, but the 1990s represent a crucial moment because the nature of this fascination was fundamentally altered. Fame and fashion scholar Pamela Church Gibson (2012) notes that it was during this decade that the interest shifted from the on-screen attire of film stars to their off-screen fashion. She further observes that alongside this development “the commercial success” of film stars became “seemingly unrelated” to their popularity (p. 53).

In this development a clear shift in public interest can be observed. Discrete performative acts were decreasing in importance as the public flocked towards coverage that pertained to fashion, as Gibson points out, but also to more generalized news about the lives of celebrity. The “arrival of the mass market for celebrity gossip” transpired in the 1990s (Turner, 2004, p. 89). Alongside this emergence came the dying breaths of the dominance of the discrete performative act in modern fame.

The public’s insatiable and ever-increasing interest in the lives of celebrities was both catered to and encouraged by the 1990s “onset of digital media” (Skjulstad, 2009, p. 187). This development has allowed celebrity coverage to continue a staggering pace of growth into the new millennium. It has contributed to an increase in the amount of celebrity coverage, but also to an increase in the forms of celebrity coverage. An increasing number of media formats began to report on celebrity in digital media’s wake. Newspapers, for example, have come to increasingly
rely on celebrity coverage as a means to maintain their “specific market appeal” and compete with more “technologically attuned” forms of media (Conboy, 2013, p. 4).

In these opening stretches of the 21st century the trend towards ever-increasing volume of celebrity coverage has only grown, in large part because of the increasingly powerful paparazzi. The paparazzi represent a particularly potent force in fame’s performative turn because they fundamentally altered the rules of the game by making performance necessary at all times. While the paparazzi have a long and storied history it is evident that in the 21st century their influence has seen a great expansion. No longer can celebrity images be as meticulously managed as they once were. The expansion of the paparazzi’s power can be seen as the result of multiple developments, including the continued prevalence of tabloids, the increased coverage of celebrities across multiple forms of media (including the relatively new celebrity gossip blog format), new technologies like camera phones and digital cameras, and the media’s increased reliance on freelance photographers (McNamara, 2011, p. 516).

Labelled as an embodiment of celebrity culture’s “obsession with mediated voyeurism” (Mendelson, 2007, p.170), the paparazzi have ensured that the modern celebrity must at all times be performing. Celebrities have lost a certain amount of autonomy in regards to controlling their own performances. They must now be ever-vigilant of their appearances and public actions. They have been called upon to constantly monitor their self-presentation, to perform from moment to moment because in a mediatized world one never knows when their picture might be snapped or when a magazine might run “unauthorized and uncontrolled” photographs and stories (Meyers, 2009, p. 900). To manage the paranoia induced by the paparazzi’s power many celebrities have developed tactics of performance, including “the fabrication of ‘street faces,’ facades maintained in expectation of constant surveillance” (Lai, 2006, p. 219).
Despite the clearly growing importance of performance to modern celebrities, we still cannot say that we have truly touched upon what constitutes a performative turn in fame. Most of the observations made up to this point have been relevant primarily to those famous individuals whose fame has been derived from discrete performative acts. What we have seen, however, is that the importance of life performances has become paramount. The modern, discrete performative act possessing celebrity is compelled at all turns to perform, rather than live, their life. However, in order to establish a performative turn in fame we must look to the ways in which the increased emphasis on performance in more traditional forms of fame has given rise to new forms of fame which are reliant *exclusively* on performance.

**Fame’s Performative Turn**

As mentioned, we cannot quite situate fame’s performative term in anything discussed thus far. What, however, is noteworthy about the previously discussed developments is that they appear to have established a precedent. With public interest pointing towards the lives, rather than the work, of the famous it became evident that simply living interestingly, giving the right performance, was indeed a sufficient bedrock upon which fame could be built; “social life as theatre” (Schechner, 2013, p. 207). With such a precedent established two primary, and highly gendered, modes of fame emerged based entirely around performances of life: the celebutante and the reality star. It is through these figures that a performative turn can be established.

**Celebutantes**

I have already briefly addressed the celebutante. If you will recall, the label was applied to 1980s club kids. Thus it is a bit of a misnomer to refer to the emergence of the celebutante as a 21st century development. A more accurate statement would be to say that in the early 2000s the celebutante reemerged in a particularly strong incarnation. The term, in fact, has a longer history...
than has previously been suggested here. It was first used in the late 1930s after gossip columnist Walter Winchell coined the term in reference to socialite Brenda Frazier (Brown, 2008, p. 314). The term resurfaced in the 1980s before again falling out of popular parlance only to reemerge in late 2003 (Brown, 2008, p. 316).

The term reemerged alongside the swelling fame of figures like Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie. The fame possessed by people like Hilton and Richie is decidedly of a performative nature. They acquired their fame by displaying “the minutiae of…public life” and offering themselves up as “tourist sight[s]” (Hillyer, 2010, p. 20). Some such figures, like Paris Hilton, did in some sense attempt to establish themselves as actresses or singers but such efforts “tend[ed] to act as…distraction” from their public performances of their personal lives (Hillyer, 2010, p. 20). As per Brown (2008), examples of the celebutantes include figures like the previously mentioned Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie, but also Lindsay Lohan, Tara Reid, and, interestingly, Britney Spears.

**Reality stars.**

The turn of the century also saw the emergence of reality television. Though the format’s breakthrough has been dated as transpiring in the late 1990s (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, p. 31) it is evident that the early 21st century saw a marked gain in its momentum. It was, after all, between 2000 and 2002 that the United States debuts of *American Idol*, *The Amazing Race*, and *Survivor* each transpired. Alongside the emergence of reality television, of course, was the emergence of a new class of celebrities whose fame was grounded in stylized performances of life. It is at this juncture important to demarcate precisely what types of reality programming best demonstrate fame’s performative turn. While talent shows like *American Idol* are certainly emblematic of reality television’s emergence and do considerable work in fostering a cultural
obsession with fame, they are not germane to my concerns. The reason for this is that despite their populist bent (Kjus, 2009, p. 287) and propensity to “place the cultivation of celebrity at their center” (Collins, 2008, p. 89) they still maintain the centrality of the discrete performative act.

More germane to my focus are other formats of reality television, particularly the “gamedoc” and “docusoap” (Collins, 2008, p. 89), which rely on more general and stylized performances that lack easily identifiable boundaries. Absent a reliance of discrete performative acts, these genres rely on something else, but what? A survey of the relevant literature suggests that the answer to such a question is that they rely on stylized performances of the ordinary. Reality television directly engages what media scholar Paddy Scannell (2002) describes as “the fundamental enigma of ordinary, everyday existence in its apparent triviality and insignificance” (p. 280). Such an engagement is accomplished by placing people construed as ordinary at the front and center of television programming. An affinity for the ordinary, it must be noted, is not unique to reality television. Fame scholar Graeme Turner (2006) dates what he calls “‘the demotic turn’” as having transpired as early as the 1980s (p.153), well before reality television’s advent.

There are thus multiple outlets in which one can witness the “discourses used to represent ‘ordinariness’ edg[ing] closer every day to the lived experience of ‘the ordinary’” as increasing numbers of “ordinary people” acquire media visibility (Turner, 2004, p. 83). Despite this, it is evident that the force of the demotic turn has only strengthened in the wake of reality television. Indeed Turner (2004) himself notes that reality television brought “the spectacle of ‘everyday life’” (p. 85) to the forefront of entertainment.
None of this is surprising given that the relationship between celebrity culture and ordinary people has always been a central aspect of the reality genre (Holmes, 2004, p. 113). The performative aspect of reality television is brought into sharper focus when we consider exactly what must be done with the ordinary for reality television to function; ordinariness is necessary but not sufficient for fame via reality television. The question, then, is how one spins fame out of the ordinary? The answer is performing.

Television personalities are “always in some sense ‘acting’” (Lury, 1995, p. 117) as they strive to offer “likeable…marketable” selves to viewing audiences for sustained periods of time (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p.76). With this in mind it is clear that reality television cast-members cannot simply be ordinary, instead they must give stylized performances of the ordinary. Importantly, these performances simultaneously function as fame-seeking behavior. In reality television there is a “necessity to perform” that functions because audiences believe that, due to the duration of surveillance, “in the end [a] ‘real’ self” must emerge (Couldry, 2008, p. 10). Finding the authentic within the artifice is indeed part of the appeal of reality television viewing (Hill, 2002, p. 337).

In light of these observations it is evident that fame has evolved to a point where it can be achieved primarily through performative means. Fame is routinely being acquired by people who are performing their lives for the viewing public and doing so without discrete performative acts. At this moment it is necessary to explicate further on an important limit to this development. This shift has not been all-encompassing; fame achieved by means of life performance is available primarily to women.
The feminine nature of performative fame

The opportunities for performative fame are available predominantly for women. To fully understand why this is the case it is necessary undertake a discussion of semantics. Until this moment I have been using the terms fame and celebrity indiscriminately. Though distinct conceptions of the terms do exist, I will continue to do so outside of instances such as this when the distinctions between the two become unavoidable. This is a conscious choice I have made in light of the fact that culturally the two terms are often used indiscriminately and furthermore there has been a decided and prominent collapse in the terms usages (van Zoonen, 2006, p. 291) that has made the distinctions less valuable. At this particular moment, however, attention must be paid to the distinctions that other scholars have made.

There are plentiful thinkers, like renowned essayist Joseph Epstein and media scholar Sue Collins, to whom a distinction between the terms fame and celebrity is important. The most common distinction between the terms concerns talent and achievement. Theorized separately, fame entails talent and achievement whereas celebrity concerns the “broadcasting” (Epstein, 2005, p. 9) or commodifying (Collins, 2008, p. 90) of such talents or achievements. These terms are not, however, neutral descriptors; they are highly gendered and as such they have great pertinence in examining how fame has been feminized.

Cultural studies scholar Liesbet van Zoonen (2006) offers up a slightly modified version of the distinction between fame and celebrity that can more fully help us understand the gendered nature of the terms. She sees fame and celebrity as both concerning publicity and thus it is in the content of said publicity that a distinction emerges. The former consists of “public recognition of exceptional achievements” while the latter provides well-knownness achieved through “mass media exposure” (p. 291) in a sense much like that meant by Boorstin (1975). Her
definition of the terms sets up a theoretical dichotomy between the terms that I find problematic. I contend that talent is a contextually bound construct and as such I find it shortsighted to dismiss mass media exposure as incapable of being an exceptional achievement in and of itself, especially in a highly mediatized society.

Fame is thus conceived of by van Zoonen (2006) as the broadcast of seemingly any exceptional achievement except for media presence. Her claim is that fame, thought of in this way, is something that women have been largely denied the opportunity to acquire (p. 291). What women have instead acquired is celebrity; “mass media exposure” that is typically concerned with the ways in which they manage and modify their bodies and appearances (p. 291-292). In media coverage of prominent women there is a pronounced interest in their “private life and leisure activity” (Geraghty, 2007, p. 106) and they are more likely to be regarded as spectacle (Edwards, 2013, p. 156).

This stands in contrast with the more masculine concept of fame. Prominent men, unlike their female counterparts, are constructed as “serious stars with careers” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). The publicity male figures receive is far more likely to be concerned with their accomplishments. We can read this divide between masculine fame and feminine celebrity as a divide between discrete performative acts and stylized performances.

We can see that an emphasis on fame, traditional achievement and discrete performative acts privileges masculinity. It has been suggested, however, that an “economy of fame” has given way to a “culture of celebrity” that is distinctly more feminine, interested in appearances (Tyler & Bennett, 2010, p. 381), and thus more concerned with life performances. In my estimation, the claim that such a shift has fully occurred is a bit of an exaggeration; men have neither stopped acquiring fame/celebrity nor have they begun to acquire it through distinctly
feminine or performative means. What is certainly true, however, is that more avenues for feminine celebrity, based on performance, have opened up.

In light of these developments certain observations become unsurprising. It is generally women who tend to fixate on celebrity emulation in terms of their appearance (Gibson, 2012, p. 24). Further, women tend to engage celebrity in “‘feminine’ worlds” like celebrity television and magazines that are focused on the “personal lives of the famous” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). The act of magazine reading is quite important for female consumption of fame and furthermore a clear shift in the style of reading celebrity magazines has been observed.

The largely female readership of such magazines are now less likely to seek identification and more likely to engage in “evaluation of the ‘masquerade’ of stardom” (Wilson, 2010, p. 28). Evaluation, however, does not stop with the celebrity. Consuming fame through magazines engenders an “immanent process of self-evaluation” in which the consumed images become “tools for developing one’s own masquerade” (read: performance) (Wilson, 2010, p. 35). It is logical, then, that fame-seeking for women might consist of performance to a large degree. Such a claim is validated by the observation that “there are few, if any, lasting male stars of reality media” (Edwards, 2013, p. 157) and the fact that not one of the celebutantes listed by Brown (2008) are male.

**A Cleavage in Fame**

The effect of the performative turn in fame has been to create a more pronounced cleavage between the masculine and feminine forms of fame. We have already seen that there is a distinct tendency to reduce female celebrities to spectacle by focusing on their appearances and personal lives rather than their work. What the performative turn, or more accurately the celebutantes and reality television stars that have ushered the turn in, have done is preempt such
reduction by seeking to establish themselves as spectacle from the outset. They have rendered feminine fame a viable path in its own right, as something that one may willfully pursue in lieu of being pushed into it as a substitute for more respected, masculine fame. As will be discussed shortly, this move has not been able to garner increased respect for feminine fame even as it has moved it away from being something that one is merely relegated to.

At this point I have established a distinct performative turn in modern celebrity. I have explored the conditions that led to this development, explored modes of fame that demonstrate fame’s performative turn, and set parameters which provide a clear idea of the particular demographic to whom this turn applies to. Having done this work one necessary step remains; exploring the ways in which fame as performative has been discussed.

**Discussions of Performative Fame**

In my research I have yet to encounter any work that lays out a fully and explicitly rhetorical conception of fame. No rhetoric of fame has been established. This is a curious observation given that celebrity is categorically created through the “mass communication of carefully selected…information” (Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006, p. 52). Despite this, some attention has been given, albeit indirectly, to the rhetorical nature of fame, and more specifically to the ways in which it is performed.

Sociologist and scholar of fame Joshua Gamson (2007) has observed that throughout the 20th century fame has been enacted by the famous in various ways to establish different sorts of relationships with the public. These shifts have followed the demands of culture. His claim is that modern celebrity is often performed in an ironic way that allows the public to be in on the joke and “offering the audience the position of control” (p. 152). His work suggests the rhetorical nature and force that is wielded by the ways in which fame is performed.
Performances of fame-seeking, however, have remained an under-discussed phenomenon. Fame-seeking has been addressed by scholars such as Nick Couldry (2012) who do valuable work in describing the cultural conditions that foster the desire for fame. However, the majority of scholarship that engages fame-seeking comes from a psychological perspective. For example, Gountas et al. (2012) have worked to create a scale that can adequately measure the desire for fame. They have found interesting connections between the desire for fame and personality, including findings which suggest that the desire for fame may well be related to “deficits in personal growth” (687). Maltby et al. (2008) has likewise done interesting work towards building a “robust model of desire for fame” (289). Further fascinating work from the psychological perspective comes from Uhls and Greenfield (2012) who echo Couldry’s (2012) claim that a mediatized society increases the prevalence of the desire for fame and consider the effects of such a culture on the young who are developmentally predisposed to value popularity (p. 10).

Discussions of the actual actions and performances of fame-seekers, however, have been strikingly minimal. One potential reason for this lack may be the low regard with which those who seek fame through primarily performative means are held. Celebrities whose fame is derived from their stylized performances of life and media presence are often written off as “faux celebrities” (Kellner, 2009, p. 716), lacking “merit” (Ferri, 2010, p. 408), and “any obvious talent” (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 145). Author Salman Rushdie (2001) even saw fit to write a piece for The Guardian decrying “the unashamed self-display of the talentless” (para. 4) that allegedly dominates reality television and articles in magazines like Vanity Fair blame such programming for creating a society “too dumb to wipe itself out” (Wolcott, 2009, para. 1).
Each of these cynical critics fails to take into account the flexible nature of talent itself. Talent is invariably culturally and contextually bound because “talents and skills are not manifested in a social vacuum” (Ybarra et. al, 2008, p. 1084). Talent is not an individual property, it is “an outcome of persons in-situations” (Barab & Plucker, 2010, p. 168) that emerges “in the dynamic transaction among the individual, the physical environment, and the sociocultural context” (Barab & Plucker, 2010, p. 174). The ability to offer “what appear to be spontaneously amusing or comedic performances”, and present “likeable…marketable selves” (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p. 76) must indeed be thought of as requiring talent in a society that has been so thoroughly mediatized. “Televisual skills” (Boyle & Kelley, 2010, p. 336) are real skills and “tightly controlled images[s]” are “feat[s] worthy of celebration” (Petersen, 2007, ‘Camp’ and manipulation section, para. 2).

What may be fairly considered problematic about the actions of celebutantes and reality television stars is not that they embrace their status as spectacle. It is instead that they may contribute to the continued reduction to spectacle of those famous women who wish their prominence to be built on something other than spectacle. Female celebrities already face the difficulty of establishing themselves as such and those who seek to make themselves spectacle may contribute to this difficulty by strengthening even further an already deeply embedded cultural tendency to turn women into spectacle. However, it strikes me as unfair to point the finger at those who would make themselves spectacle. The blame would be more appropriately placed on those in contemporary culture who display an unwillingness to allow women to be anything other than spectacle; the desire of some women to be as much does not constitute license for a similar consideration of all public women.
The denigration of those who actively practice feminine might be generously read as a response to this dilemma. Even if such a reading is correct, I would argue that it is still wrongheaded. I would further argue that the choice to cling to a conflation of talent and discrete performative acts has hindered the serious consideration of important aspects of modern fame. Writing the practitioners of performative fame off as talentless hacks has apparently impeded consideration of their behavior as wielding rhetorical force. Clinging to A Time When Talent Mattered in this manner shortchanges the notion of talent and is frankly unilluminating. This project seeks to fill this gap by laying out the practices and characteristics that define both masculine fame built on discrete performative acts and feminine fame built of stylized life performances. To do so, I will be conducting rhetorical criticism of narratives that distill these practices and characteristics. The Bling Ring will serve as a template of the feminine and Hustle & Flow for the masculine. In the following section I will delve into deeper consideration how these films will be approached in fulfilling this goal. Before moving into this discussion, however, I would like to make note of one of my chief motivations in selecting these particular artifacts: their dates of release. As discussed earlier, these opening stretches of the 21st century have been a particularly crucial time in positioning fame as an endeavor of performance. These films have been released along that timeline, The Bling Ring in 2013 and Hustle & Flow in 2005, and as such have the potential to speak to the ways in which fame has been evolving.

**Approaching Films Rhetorically**

Rhetorical scholar David Blakesley (2003) has posited that since the 1990s rhetorical and film studies have become increasingly affiliated with one another, to the point that he posits a rhetorical turn in the study of film. This move was part of a larger shift “across the broader field of the humanities” that consisted of the increased recognition of the rhetorical force of “all
symbolic acts” (p. 9). While the association between film and rhetorical studies may have, to a great extent, coalesced into something substantial and recognizable in the 1990s, prior work to establish a means by which to conduct the rhetorical criticism of film does exist. One noteworthy predecessor to Blakesley’s rhetorical turn is Thomas W. Benson (1970). Benson put forth some important ideas about the rhetorical criticism of film and undertook an analysis of the film Joe in order to exemplify his claims. Among his claims is the notion that “American popular films” maintain a “constitutive” relationship to American values (p. 612). He thus focuses on greatly on the relationship between films and their audiences, looking for “clues as to how audiences are likely to apprehend” what they are witnessing (p. 612).

The late 1970s saw a constitutive relationship between the films and the values of the United States established in the work of Rushing & Frentz (1978) who observed that societies have “sometimes” been subject to “complete re-orientations in value structure” by popular films. They specifically cite a shift from a “positivistic” to a “transcendent value orientation” as being aided by 1973’s The Exorcist (p. 65). The ability of films to participate in cultural movements is a primary reason I have chosen to attend to filmic representations of fame-seeking. Filmic representations are important generally because “the images spread through…films” actively shape consumers’ “attitude[s] towards events” and lifestyle choices (Abrudan, 2011, p. 26). Media scholar Douglas Kellner (1995) notes that “media culture play[s] an important role in structuring contemporary identity and shaping thought and behavior” (p. 282). Indeed, the media are one means by which people shape their entire “view[s] of the world” (Kellner, 1995, p. 60). Media representation also shapes how people come to understand what it means to be part of a particular demographic (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 297). As previously discussed, the pursuit of
fame is an increasingly common endeavor and filmic depictions of that pursuit thus have the potential to influence a large number of people.

Frentz & Rushing (1978) recognized these capabilities and accordingly they introduced what they termed a social value model of criticism and undertook the task of showing the ways in which Rocky “sought to provide a remedy for [America’s] illness” by helping to revitalize the American Dream, which had been caught between the competing forces of “moralism and materialism” (p. 233). In subsequent years multiple rhetorical scholars have utilized the social value model of criticism. For instance, Hoerl (2008) uses it to examine the ways in which the film Ghosts of Mississippi rhetorically functions to close a dark chapter in Mississippi’s public memory. She observes that character evolution in films can function rhetorically to “resolve conflicting social values” and encourage “similar pattern[s]” in their viewership (p. 65). Winn (2003) similarly draws upon social value model criticism to explore how both The Firm and Wall Street advocated for audiences acceptance of their “morally superior, but economically inferior, working class status” at a time when the middle and working classes were under assault (p. 316). Many other rhetorical scholars have taken up a social value model of criticism in looser or more implicit ways as well. Smith (2009), for instance, examines early 2000s celebrity biopics to chart “an ideological shift” consisting of “a reconfiguration of the American Dream” which positions “the trappings of the celebrity lifestyle” as the true indicators of personal and professional success (p. 236). Though not explicitly invoked, Smith’s (2009) work is clearly influenced by a chain of thought and practice emanating from the work of Benson (1970) and Frentz & Rushing (1978), perhaps most explicitly the example of the latter in considering “pattern[s] of value change in the rhetorical context” of film (p. 231).
The scholars referenced here also made smaller claims that allowed for films to be perceived as doing things other than providing an in to charting value changes. Rushing & Frentz (1978) plainly state that “film and society reciprocally influence one another” and that film can often be seen as “symbolizing trends” (p. 64). They thus allow that while some films may be active participants in a society’s “complete re-orientations in value structure,” others may have the smaller agenda or function of taking a trend “already in progress” and documenting it (p. 65-66). As media scholar George Gerbner (1985) notes, media representations have the ability to “reflect…the general structure of social relations” even as it may simultaneously cultivate them into forms of government (Gerbner, 1985, p. 16).

Thinking of film in such terms allows the critic to take a step back and consider a given filmic text as a fragment in a larger discourse that “is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made” (McGee, 1990, p. 279). Such an approach enables critics to engage a work that may not be “the defining work” that shakes the system up, yet may still provide valuable insight as to what is transpiring in culture at a given moment. An exemplar of this kind of work can be found in Ashcraft & Flores (2003), who draw upon McGee’s observations and discuss the ways in which two particular films “stage” a social happening: “the masculinity crisis” (p. 8).

In their analysis, Ashcraft & Flores (2003) attend to the “performances [that] bring comfort and resolution” to this masculinity crisis (p. 8). They neither make the claim that their analyzed texts bear responsibility for their examined cultural shifts, nor are they explicitly exploring a shift in cultural values. Instead, their selected works are viewed as “meta-performance wherein actors recognized as such articulate…possibilities for social actors” (p. 4). Their approach is thus not social value model criticism even as it depends on the constitutive
relationship between United States films and values that Rushing & Frentz (1978) and their
critical model helped establish. It is in the spirit of the work of Ashcraft & Flores (2003) that I
will be engaging my chosen artifacts.

Commensurate to the approach taken by Ashcraft & Flores (2003), I conceive of this
cultural moment as a crisis of public representation that encourages the continued and increased
reduction of public women to spectacle. I will be treating my chosen artifacts as texts that
“shoulder [the] tensions” (p. 8) of this crisis. Ashcraft & Flores (2003) highlight the ways in
which their selected films may reshape “the social imagination” by supplying “social actors with
roles and scripts” that may enable them to establish a desired form of masculinity (p. 3-4). A
point of divergence, then, is that in their discussion the films’ characters emerge as inventive,
though not always ethical, actors who write new scripts with which they navigate the masculinity
crisis and thus offer up new possibilities to viewers. This project, on the other hand, deals with
narratives wherein the characters do not so much respond inventively to the relevant crisis as
they live it out using the script with which it provides them. Thus the “possibilities for social
actors” (Ashcraft & Flores, 2003, p. 4) that the films present are claimed to be neither inventive
nor new; they are rather conceived of as re-presentations, and distillations, of the possibilities
that the crisis itself provides.

At this point I will introduce a final consideration in my treatment of the selected
artifacts. Namely, that the nature of the approach to the material taken by the films’ respective
directors is drastically different. As such there will be marked shifts in my tone as a critic as I
engage each work and some advance explication of this is prudent.

Sofia Coppola, the director of *The Bling Ring*, tells the film’s story in a style that is
highly clinical, far more descriptive and prescriptive. This quality has indeed been recognized in
the film’s reception, frequently noted by its reviewers. New York Times film critic A. O. Scott (2013) notes that the film exhibits Coppola’s tendency to examine her characters with a “detached, quiet sympathy” that refuses “to mock or judge” (para. 1-2), while The A.V. Club’s Ben Kenigsburg (2013) notes that the film is not “so much interested in provocation as sociology” (para. 3). Perhaps Richard Brody of The New Yorker (2013) stated it most succinctly, observing that Coppola dares “to face these…phenomena on aesthetic terms” and in doing so takes on “a degree of their flatness and simplicity” (para. 10). It is further worth noting that The Bling Ring is a self-conscious engagement on the modern state of celebrity and celebrity culture. The film thus lends itself very nicely to the approach taken here because it directly addresses issues of fame in a straightforward, detached style that pushes the viewer and critic to draw conclusions about the phenomena it engages.

By contrast, the directorial vision of Hustle & Flow could hardly be more attached to and invested in the film’s main character. Craig Brewer has not made a film that is in any way about celebrity culture. What he has made is a film about a man seeking a better life who has turned to a quest for fame as a means to achieve such a life. The protagonists in The Bling Ring may be fairly thought of as the faces of a cultural moment that the film is exploring whereas the protagonist of Hustle & Flow, Djay, is, without qualification, presented as his film’s hero. The audience is at every turn asked to identify with him. Such a positioning is furthermore entirely intentional. A bonus featurette on the film’s DVD release entitled Behind the Hustle reveals a continuous tendency of those involved in the making of the film to refer to Djay as their film’s “hero” (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006a).

As a tale of fame-seeking in the 21st century Hustle & Flow is intimately connected to the crisis with which this project deals. Its connection, however, is not a straightforward engagement
of celebrity culture. The audience is asked to identify with a fame-seeker, rather than to consider the large-scale cultural ramifications of his quest. Thus what is revealed in the film about the ways in which masculine fame is structured is implicit rather than explicit. *Hustle & Flow* has much to reveal about how masculine fame is structured by the assumptions it makes and the scenarios it contrives, but it does not ask for masculine fame itself to be categorically considered. It instead requests that the viewing audiences and critics submit to the assumptions it makes about masculine fame. As will become clear, many of these assumptions are roundly unethical. Despite this, the film seeks to foster identification with them and as such my engagement of the film will necessarily take on a more sharply critical tone.

**Description of Chapters**

Three additional chapters follow this one. The first two will consist of rhetorical criticism of the selected artifacts. The second chapter will interrogate *The Bling Ring* as a distillation of the practices and characteristics central to feminine, performative fame. Masculine fame will receive a similar treatment through interrogation of *Hustle & Flow* in chapter three. An important aspect of my treatment of each of these works will be attending to the culture in which they emerged. Performative fame is a new development that has only become available in the wake of significant cultural shifts. While there are obvious exceptions to this observation, the 1930s fame of Brenda Frazier being one such example, it is equally obvious that the 21st century has been the first cultural moment in which performative fame emerged as systematic and enduring.

Culture in this project is conceived of as “a repertoire of things learned, including mental schemes and images, values and attitudes, dispositions, forms of speech and organization, narratives, and commonplace knowledge” (Carrithers, 2012, p. 4). The fame-seeking
performances with which I am concerned will be discussed as rhetorical performances guided by culture thought of in this way. The fame-seeking performances can thus be thought of not only as rhetorical in nature but culturally inflected as well. As Richard Schechner (2013), one of performance studies’ most influential thinkers, notes, performances reflect “not-so-hidden social scripts” that vary across, but are always bound to, “cultures or historical periods” (p. 209).

Following these chapters, a fourth will conclude the project. In this chapter the observations gleaned from the preceding criticisms will be examined side by side. This examination will serve a heuristic function on one hand. It will provide general points of divergence that can be gleaned from the prior examination of each work. One the other hand, it will introduce new points of consideration that will have opened up through the interrogation of each film and point to potential future directions for further inquiry.
Chapter 2: The Bling Ring

In this chapter I will be engaging in the rhetorical criticism of the 2013 film The Bling Ring directed by Sofia Coppola. The film tells the story of a group of fame-obsessed teenagers who robbed the homes of several celebrities. Before engaging in the actual criticism, however, I feel it is prudent to provide some grounding context for the film by discussing the events that inspired it. It is thus such a discussion that will begin this chapter, followed by a discussion of the approach I will be employing in my criticism. Upon completion of these tasks I will begin conducting the rhetorical criticism itself.

The Bling Ring

In the eleven months between October of 2008 and August of 2009 a group of California teenagers and their associates managed to steal over $3 million worth of high-end luxury and designer goods from the homes of various celebrities, including figures like Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, and Audrina Patridge (Sales, 2010, p. 1). Eventually brought to justice for their crimes, the members comprising what has been dubbed “the bling ring” by much of the press are a particularly striking crew precisely because they are not what one might traditionally think of us burglars. Rachel Lee, Alexis Neiers, Nick Prugo, Diana Tamayo, and Courtney Ames comprised the bulk of this criminal ring. The motive of these actors does not appear to have arisen from any legitimate need for money, or from the desire to hurt their victims. Indeed, it appears that their motivation was something else entirely: the desire to be like the celebrities from which they stole.

This was definitely the angle from which the media reported the case. The New York Times stated that the “tale lies at the intersection of celebrity, teen culture, reality TV and the internet” and proffered that the acts transpired in part because of the ever shrinking distance
between everyday life and the lives of celebrities (Salkin, 2009, p. 1). Nancy Jo Sales (2010), in a now famous *Vanity Fair* article, collected information from several sources that give credence to this observation. She quotes Nick Prugo, the group’s lone male teen and the member who was most cooperative with law enforcement, as saying that Rachel, the alleged mastermind, was motivated to rob Hollywood starlets because she loved their fashion and wanted to emulate them (p. 2).

Officer Brett Goodkin, who headed the case, spoke with Sales (2010) as well. She reported that he noticed that the crimes had a bit of a “stalkerish” attribute to them, comparing the crimes they committed to those depicted in *The Silence of the Lambs* (p. 2). She even quotes the L.A.P.D. police report as stating that the crime spree, in its beginning stages, was “fueled by celebrity worship” (p. 3). One of the ring’s members, Courtney Ames, gives credence to this, allegedly denying her involvement and distancing herself from the other perpetrators by stating that she was “not into that whole crowd that’s into fame” (p. 3). Furthermore, one of their victims, Audrina Patridge, also speculated their motive to be getting nearer to the famous (p. 2).

It is evident that celebrity emulation is not the only end that was served by the bling ring’s criminal means. Prugo admits that part of the reason for his thieving was to fund a drug habit and some profit was indeed generated from these robberies (Sales, 2010, p. 2). Nevertheless, the celebrity emulation aspect of these acts is difficult to miss. It is certainly this angle that was most interesting to American film director Sofia Coppola.

*The Bling Ring*

It is evident the saga’s relationship to celebrity culture is at the forefront of the film’s agenda. Sofia Coppola is the director responsible for *The Bling Ring*, a semi-fictional retelling of this crime saga, and it is clear that her intentions were to explore the story from this angle. In an
Interview magazine interview she notes that the people involved in this tale, in her estimation, wanted the marketable, ready-to-be-branded lifestyle that celebrities live. It was this desire that she attributed as being a root cause in their actions (Prince). It is with this perspective that the film was made. That much is evident from a viewing of the film, but equally revealing is a documentary short included on the film’s DVD release entitled Behind the Real Bling Ring. It is in this short that we get a vivid sense of the lens through which Coppola views this story and thus what the film is attempting to do.

Nancy Jo Sales, the author of the Vanity Fair article upon which the film was based, appears and further elaborates on what she perceived to be motivating factors in the bling ring’s actions. She says that Nick Prugo elucidated the desires of the members of the group to be able to appear at exclusive clubs looking stylish and beautiful and being photographed upon their arrival. She further points to instances where the robbers would flaunt their deeds by posting pictures of themselves wearing stolen goods online. In one particularly shocking instance, Prugo posted a picture of himself wearing jewelry stolen from Paris Hilton with text scrawled across it asking Paris if the jewelry looked familiar (Ventrella, 2013).

She reads actions like this as an attempt to be noticed by celebrities, some of whom, as other contributors to the documentary discuss, knew who these teenagers were because they had procured access to exclusive nightclubs frequented by figures like Hilton and Lohan. It is thus reasonable to assume that these bids for attention were not just wild fantasies, but legitimate possibilities. More than tools in a bid for their owners’ attention, the objects stolen from the famous are also theorized by Leo Braudy, a highly influential scholar of fame, to play the same role as particular religious artifacts. Coming into contact with them, he posits, connected the thieves to the objects’ rightful owners (Ventrella, 2013).
Mike Walters, the news director for TMZ, corroborates this point of view. He points out that some of what was stolen was not actually valuable. The specific example he gives is that the teens stole Hilton’s cigarettes because, he conjectures, they wanted to smoke cigarettes owned by Paris Hilton. S. Mark Young, professor of management and communication at the University of Southern California, also appears to posit that these teenagers exemplified the way in which one of the major currencies of the 21st century is fame. By coming into such close contact with celebrities, he argues, the bling ring was able to accrue a considerable amount of currency. He also articulates what he presumes to be their logic: if they can simply successfully emulate those they are stealing from, then they too might be able to acquire similar fame and status (Ventrella, 2013).

What I am hoping has emerged at this point is that *The Bling Ring* is a story about the quest for fame. The quest is both literal and spiritual, as the actors seek to acquire actual fame for themselves, but not before coming into a sort of perceived communion between themselves and their idols. Coppola is indeed transparent about this. In an interview with *The Guardian* she mentions that the film is dealing with the growing cultural obsession with celebrity. One of the thieves, Alexis Neiers, she observes as being “delusional” in her satisfaction with the fame that she acquired through the criminal saga. In Coppola’s estimation, she seemed unwilling to accept that the media interest surrounding her was due to her criminal status, and not her impeccable style (Gilbey, 2013, para. 5) It was this type of all-encompassing obsession with fame that intrigued Coppola, and thus the film stands as a document of her engagement with what the obsession with, and quest for, fame looks like in the early 21st century.

Coppola’s interest in this aspect of the story can be seen clearly in the choices she has made involving the manner in which the story is told. For instance, in addition to the above listed
members of the bling ring, there are two additional people who were charged in the case. Their names are Johnny Ajar and Roy Lopez, Jr. The former was a nightclub owner who acted as the group’s fence, selling the stolen goods that the thieves opted out of owning, for instance, Orlando Bloom’s collection of Rolexes (Sales, 2010, p. 2). Lopez was responsible for two thirds of the total $3 million worth of stolen goods. He reportedly went to Hilton’s, alone, and stole $2 million worth of jewelry (Ventrella, 2013).

Each of these figures plays only a very minor role in the film. The decision to minimize their characters signals an interest primarily in the fame-seeking, rather than criminal, aspects of the story. Furthermore, while copious drug use is depicted in the film it is never presented as a motivating factor in the crimes. It is true that Coppola depicts the thieves selling particular items, but such action is often downplayed and the stolen objects are more typically fetishized than assessed for value. Only twice does a member of the bling ring explicitly reference the value of the stolen goods during the robberies; Marc (the renamed, film version of Nick Prugo) does so in response to some found photographs and Rebecca (the filmic stand-in for Rachel Lee) does so in reference to Paris Hilton’s dog.

That Coppola is interested in the fame-obsessed aspects of the criminal activity is furthermore explicitly stated in the film itself. When pressed by a character standing in for Nancy Jo Sales, Marc speculates that Rebecca committed the robberies because she wanted to be part of the celebrity lifestyle. The committed crimes are furthermore, at all times, portrayed as means to that lifestyle. Rebecca and Marc commit multiple robberies of people who are not famous and Coppola makes it clear that what is gained from these exploits is the means by which to purchase signifiers of the celebrity lifestyle. For instance, after the pair robs the house of an acquaintance of Marc’s they “borrow” an incredibly expensive car to go cruising and shop in expensive stores.
Perhaps the celebrity obsession of these characters can be seen most clearly in one of the film’s closing scenes. Rebecca, while detained and being questioned, asks a police officer if he has spoken to the victims. The response is affirmative and she cannot help but to ask him about the response of Lindsay Lohan.

It is true that throughout the film the scenes of robbery become increasingly frantic and hurried, taking on a more criminal tone. However, the shift is far from comprehensive. Interspersed throughout these later, more hurried robberies are scenes of the group casually hanging out in Paris Hilton’s house. The more hurried robberies of other locales may be indicative of the fact that Hilton’s home is the one offering them the most protection; each of the other house are smaller, and have more windows. Furthermore, the more frantic tone of certain robberies may be merely aesthetic choices, employed by Coppola to convey that as her protagonists sink further and further into criminal behavior the stakes become higher and higher. Whatever the case, the acknowledgement of celebrity robbery as a criminal act is present, but is on the whole subservient to celebrity worship.

It is evident that the film serves the purposes of this project quite comfortably. It is self-consciously an examination of contemporary celebrity culture and the deep obsession with fame. The film directly engages this condition and does so by telling a story that is heavily rooted in reality.

It is thus evident that Coppola intended and succeeded at telling this story primarily as an event that is representative of contemporary culture’s obsession with celebrity. It is this decision that makes the film such a potent object of study for my purposes. The film directly engages 21st century celebrity obsession as well as the new approaches that have become viable means of
fame-seeking. Coppola sharply attends to the increasingly performative dimension of fame as well as the ways in which such pursuits have been thoroughly feminized.

My task in approaching *The Bling Ring* is to unveil how the performances are used by the film’s characters to achieve performative fame. I establish who is being depicted by the film, and the cultural context of which they are a part. I then look at how and what these characters perform, while assessing how their performances reflect their cultural context. Giving adequate attention to the complex entanglement of these performances with the world around them is of particular importance; as film theorist and historian David Bordwell (1989) observes, the critic cannot be content to merely provide “implicit or symptomatic meanings,” instead she “must justify them by means of public discourse” (p. 34).

In the first section I lay out whose story is told in the film and draw upon the work of Nick Couldry (2012) to establish the evident influence that a fame culture has wielded over these actors. I then transition into a discussion of the ways in which the film positions its protagonists as practicing and valuing fame in both local and macro contexts. In the following section I attend to the role played by social media in the bling ring’s carefully staged presentations of self before transitioning into my next section, a discussion of the act of self-commodification and the influence over these performances wielded by neoliberal thought. Following this discussion is a section devoted to articulating the influence of another, closely related, strand of contemporary thought: postfeminism. A discussion of the role of material objects and places will follow this section before transitioning into a discussion of the dangerous nature of the pursuit of feminine fame that *The Bling Ring* establishes. I will finally conclude with a discussion of what is absent in the film’s construction of feminine fame.
The Players and the Culture

The film’s protagonists are young high-school students who are thoroughly part of the demographic to which a consumption economy, and economy with strong ties to celebrity, is relevant (Marshall, 2006, p. 202-203). This age group is furthermore identified as having a developmental predisposition to value popularity quite highly (Uhls & Greenfield, 2012, p. 10). The film repeatedly depicts the characters entertaining themselves by consulting various fashion magazines, tabloids, and celebrity gossip blogs. By doing so Coppola firmly establishes the main characters as thoroughly enmeshed in what Nick Couldry (2012) has labeled “fame culture,” characterized by a constant consumption of a never-ending stream of celebrity news (p.81). Fame culture further entails the construction of media presence or celebrity as a lack (Couldry, 2012, p. 93). What figures like reality television stars and celebutantes have done is made it apparent that such a lack may be fulfilled by giving stylized performances of life. It is not, however, merely fame culture that has contributed to the increased emphasis placed on performance in contemporary culture; life itself has come to be a broadly performative endeavor.

As sociologist Chris Rojek (2010) has pointed out, since at least the mid-1980s associations with particular collectivities have been eschewed in favor of aesthetics as the means of social positioning. One response to postmodernisms rejection of collective identities and master narratives was a “new interest in…fashion and bodily adornment” that supplanted collectivities as a means to establishing social identities (p. 62). Social positioning came to be increasingly guided by the “tangible, measureable” presentation of the self rather than “falling back on collectivity” as a means by which to provide a particular social cachet (p. 62). In the preceding chapter I established that the emphasis on performances that highlight appearances and aesthetics are particularly relevant to women because of the cultural tendency to
turn them into spectacle. Indeed, Rojek (2010) notes that despite the great work that feminism has done, women are still often presented as subservient to men and media representations of them tend to focus on their appearances (p. 120-121). The above developments thus have particularly strong ramifications for women in general, and the members of the bling ring specifically. Four of the five members of the bling ring are women, and the group’s lone male, Marc, is gay. Marc’s sexuality takes on particular relevance given that “American culture does a thorough job of connecting gay masculinities to [the] more broadly subordinated gender form” of femininities (Linneman, 2008, p. 584).

The members of the bling ring thus exist in a culture that demands performance and places an incredibly high premium on fame. At one point or another in the film all but one of the bling ring’s members explicitly express a desire for fame. Unsurprisingly, the expressed desires routinely betray a desire for a fame based on spectacle. Rebecca, the ring leader, wants to attend fashion design school like the girls on *The Hills* and eventually have her own lines of merchandise and show to host, while Marc hopes to one day have his own lifestyle brand, and Nicki (the film’s version of Alexis Neiers) and Sam, a character based on a woman named Tess Taylor who was associated with, but never proven to be a member of, the bling ring, can at one point be seen discussing their desire to be cast in a music video. Despite the fact that these characters display the desire for specific, concrete incarnations of fame, I contend that their desire in resolutely generic.

None of the characters are ever portrayed as passionate about anything but increasing their status by becoming more well-known. No passion for their claimed goals is ever expressed; they are instead portrayed as a means to celebrity. The bling ringers are portrayed as wanting to achieve these goals, not because they have passion for any activity per se, but because they are
the activities undertaken by those with fame. Their true passion lies in the lifestyle and status associated with the goals they profess to have.

It is unsurprising, then, that the observable effort the bling ringers put into achieving celebrity is manifested not in vigorous design-sketching, hours of dance practice, or other creative endeavors, but in the emulation of the lifestyles lived by the rich and famous. This lack of attention or concern for craft and activity is similarly visible in the way they regard the famous themselves. As *The New Yorker’s* review of the film points out, none of them care much about the celebrities’ output: “nobody talks about stories…they know the actors whom series and movies have turned into celebrities, but have little interest in the shows themselves.” All that the celebrities they obsess over have in common, the review points out, “is stuff” (Brody, 2013, para. 7).

Considering their point of entry for interest in celebrities it is unsurprising that they seek fame primarily through performative, aesthetic means. They are interested in appearances, not craft or work in the traditional sense. For example, the fantasies of Marc and Rebecca (the film’s stand-in for Rachel Lee) to market their own merchandise hinges on their acquisition of celebrity. Their expressed desires are incongruous with, for example, the type of students they to be. They attend a special school for students who have been kicked out of their regular high school, Marc for erratic attendance and Rebecca for drug use. They are never depicted as taking their education seriously. Thus their desire to launch merchandise lines is not paired with an interest in acquiring the skill that would enable them to do so. Instead, their envisioned route to such goals is to follow the leads of figures like Paris Hilton and Lauren Conrad whose lines have been developed and released to capitalize on to their prior spectacle.
Such an assertion is bolstered, again, by the lack of time spent by the characters honing any sort of traditional craft. Their time is instead spent partying, doing drugs, trying on clothes, consuming celebrity gossip, and thieving. As bearers of femininity, or that which is culturally coded as feminine, a fame based on such spectacle is precisely the type of fame they may be offered. It can thus be said that their own interests and priorities, in conjunction with their cultural backdrop, is highly deterministic of the way in which they choose to pursue celebrity.

Before delving headfirst into examination of the specific tactics, informing factors, and ramifications of the bling ring’s quest for fame, one other consideration is significant for the positioning of these actors. The fame desired by the bling ring is generalized, meaning that fame is, to them, of inherent value. They are thus not bound to pursuing fame only at a macro level and indeed exhibit a sophisticated understanding of the value of local celebrity. They are positioned as straddling the two categories and the following section is designed to address this issue.

**Local and Macro Celebrity**

The move towards studying celebrity in local contexts has emerged from the obvious difficulties in studying celebrity. There are well-documented barriers to studying the famous first-hand, including the hesitancy of the famous themselves as well as leeriness of behalf of researchers (Ferris, 2010, p. 394). In response to this sociologist Kerry O. Ferris has advocated for a “downsizing” of celebrity studies as a potential solution to this difficulty. Such downsizing would consist of detailing the “relational dynamics” that define celebrity and studying the easier to access “local celebrities” whose lives mimic these dynamics (p. 393-394).

This line of thought has much to contribute to the current project. The members of the bling ring have macro-fame as their stated goal, however, much of what they can be seen to
possess throughout the film is a form of local celebrity that is in the process of swelling into a more widespread notoriety. The importance of this observation lies in the fact that, in this instance, there is great continuity between the types of performance that generate each of the two levels of fame. There seems to be an unspoken understanding amongst the film’s characters that the establishment of local celebrity amongst their non-famous peers is a step towards wider recognition. The protagonists value the awe of their peers, or perhaps, speaking in the parlance of celebrity, their fans.

The film’s characters are robustly positioned as existing in two worlds. On one hand, they, because of bling ringer Chloe’s (the filmic version of Courtney Ames) romantic relationship with an exclusive club’s owner, have access to exclusive nightlife. They are seen multiple times hanging out in social hotspots, sometimes receiving bottle service, alongside celebrities like Kirsten Dunst and Paris Hilton. On the first occasion that Marc is invited to join the group on one such outing he excitedly draws attention to the fact that he is in the presence of Paris Hilton. The response he receives from Nicki is a casual and almost bored “yeah, she’s here a lot” before the subject is dropped. Marc draws attention to their growing fame at one point, responding to an interview question by stating that the five robbers “got in everywhere” were loved by everyone. He also mentions the fact that he stumbled across a fan page dedicated to him on the internet.

On the other hand, the group is also shown to still frequent less exclusive social gatherings. They are shown in a house party, surrounded by people who are not famous. During scenes that take place in three of group’s members’ high school they reference hosting and attending parties and gatherings. It is thus established that they are plugged into a social scene with a considerably lower profile. However, in these engagements they use their close proximity
to macro-celebrity as a means by which to establish themselves. At parties, their thieving exploits are known, commented upon, and admired. “I heard you went to Rachel Bilson’s House” exclaims one excited partygoer. She receives a casual affirmative answer from Nicki. In response, she even more excitedly lets out an expression of disbelief and envy, “shut the fuck up!” Nicki responds proudly, but casually, by announcing the boldness and ease of her own actions. She smirks a bit, and in this moment she is every bit a star, holding her audience in rapture and displaying the “recognizability, relational asymmetry, [and] lack of conventional mutuality” that constitute the relational dynamics of fame (Ferris, 2010, p. 393).

Thus the same behaviors which characterize macro-celebrity are, in this instance, behaviors that lead to the acquisition of local celebrity. A focus on local celebrity may have the consequence of ignoring some of the crucial considerations of political economy that are intimately connected with the study of celebrity (P. Simonson, personal communication, January 14, 2013). This is an important concern which draws attention to the fact that scholars must attend to the very real differences between a goofy, small town news anchor who achieves local celebrity and a figure like Paris Hilton. In this instance, however, I find the contiguity between the constituent behaviors of the respective levels of fame to be ripe for exploration in terms of political economy.

Consumers of fame use the famous as templates to be emulated. The consumption of fame has been said to engender an “immanent process of self-evaluation” in which consumed images become “tools for developing one’s own masquerade” (Wilson, 2010, p. 35). The tactics and behaviors of the famous are imported into everyday life as performative guides. This phenomenon is patently visible in *The Bling Ring* and stands as a provocative account of the ways in which the performances of media figures, thoroughly enmeshed in the political
economy, influence the behaviors of those with far less public visibility. In the following sections I will be exploring more specifically the mechanics of the fame-seeking performances given by the bling ring. It is in these sections that the trickling-down of the practices of the bling ring’s idols will become most clear. The first way in which we may most clearly see the bling ring’s celebrity mimicry in their pursuit of fame is in their use of social media.

**Self-presentation through Social Media**

Performative presentations of self depicted in the film depend on the rampant employment of social media, primarily for the members of the bling ring to publish pictures of themselves. Pictures and images are of particular importance for feminine fame because whereas men maintain a status of being “serious stars with careers,” women are often regarded as spectacle (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). The spectacle of female, or feminine, celebrity largely consists of public interest in their appearances (van Zoonen, 2006, p. 291-292) as well as their “private life and leisure activity” (Geraghty, 2007, p. 106). The bling ring thus takes their cue from the pioneers of the early 21st century performative turn in fame, celebutantes and reality television stars who responded to media interest in feminine spectacle by offering themselves up as such.

Members of the group are consistently photographing themselves in ways that flaunt the trappings of the celebrity lifestyle. They photograph themselves inside the places and with the things that matter. They can be seen inside Paris Hilton’s home, holding up her sparkling lips shaped phone. They photograph themselves posing with stolen Chanel purses and inside an exclusive, but unnamed club. These photographs clearly emulate paparazzi pictures of celebrities, also scattered throughout the film. The pictures of celebrities depict them posing on the red carpet, stepping into limousines while wearing expensive clothing and accessories, like a
pair of sunglasses which appear on Paris Hilton and read “I love VIP room.” Also shown in the film is a clip of a red carpet interview conducted with Audrina Patridge.

The photographs of both celebrities and the members of the bling ring as well as red carpet/paparazzi footage introduced throughout the film are presented in a distinct manner that creates a strong parallel between the images of the bling ring and the images of their idols. The images are consistently presented by Coppola in a manner that gives them center stage. The interviews are not watched on television; they take up the entire screen. The images are sometimes presented in a fast montage in front of nothing but a black screen, or a social media platform onto which they have been uploaded. Only twice is there dialogue transpiring while the pictures are shown; once when Rebecca says that she “literally loves Audrina’s style” right before a photo montage of Audrina Patridge ends and again when the bling ring is at last being pieced together by the cops and the photographs of the criminals have become evidence rather than social capital.

Coppola thus accomplishes two things with this strategy. First, by foregrounding the images she reveals their primacy. Apart from these pictures there is nothing but blackness or a platform for their dispensation. These images, and the lifestyle they depict, are all that matters. They are the “holy relic[s]” of a fame culture (Howells, 2011, p. 124). Second, by stylistically paralleling the shots of both the stars themselves and the bling ring she establishes a clear and vivid parallel between the consumption of celebrity images and the dispensation of images by those aspiring to celebrity.

Widely recognized stars have their spectacle dispersed though various means, including tightly controlled interviews and profiles by journalists and reporters, as well as less controlled encounters with the paparazzi. More recently, however, celebrities have also begun to employ
various forms of social media. The practice has become prevalent to the extent that it is changing celebrity culture itself as the stars more “actively address and interact with fans” (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 139-140). The bling ring, lacking access to all of the resources enjoyed by celebrities, utilizes this method. The practices of celebrity image management and engagement with the public though social media have influenced everyday users of such technology, and this influence is visible in the bling ring’s use of these tools. The goal of such practices is for users to establish a form of micro-celebrity, understood here as a mindset which views an audience “as a fan base” and seeks to manage said audience by providing them with “carefully constructed” self-presentations for consumption (Marwick & boyd, 2011, p. 139-140). In effect, the use of social media by non-famous individuals can be seen as an exercise in inventing and performing for an audience. Such an approach lends itself well to those seeking fame that may lack the resources to promote themselves in other ways. Social media thus becomes their primary tool for self-promotion, presentation, and commodification.

Coppola establishes her characters as utilizing social media as a way to do their own press, to flaunt their possessions and lifestyles, and to become spectacle. At one point Marc references a gargantuan amount of friend requests that he received on the film’s unnamed social media platform. His lifestyle and its images have garnered him a substantial online presence and as he reveals this incident he coyly grins and reveals that, without even looking at them, he accepted them all. He also reveals that he discovered a fan page online dedicated to him. He is, like each member of the bling ring, intent on offering himself up in exactly the same manner as those whose status he desires.

Such a development is unsurprising. Celebrity has long been tied to the transition from an economy of production to one of consumption but celebrity studies scholar P. David Marshall
(2010) argues that the shift could be more accurately described as a shift from the production of goods to the production of the self. In light of this, he observes that celebrity has long been a “pedagogical tool” in teaching consumers how to “make” themselves (p. 36). Drawing on Erving Goffman, Marshall describes the performance of the self as “a conscious act of the individual” requiring “careful staging” to maintain (p. 39).

Many people have, of course, long considered the self to be a performance, but celebrity culture makes a distinct contribution by placing the emphasis on how the individual self can be produced “through the public world” that social media is an increasingly important part of (Marshall, 2010 p. 46). Social media functions as a new stage on which performances can transpire. Online settings like Facebook and Twitter allow users to stage the self “as both character and performance” in “ritual performance[s] of the self” that are at all times “highly conscious” of the potential to be seen (Marshall, 2010, p. 40).

The bling ring embodies the phenomenon and in doing so practice blatant self-commodification. Celebrity has, of course, always relied on such practices, however, before fame’s performative turn self-commodification was practiced in service of other commodities, like films (Dyer, 2007, p. 86), rather than as a goal in and of itself. Thus in the quest for a feminine, performative fame there is a need for the practice of self-commodification. The increased emphasis on such practices establishes the resultant fame as being exemplary of neoliberal thought.

**Self-commodification and Neoliberalism**

Neoliberalism posits the individual as a *homo economicus*, a figure who is rational and opportunistic. This conception is “not necessarily” viewed as a realistic “representation of the ‘truth’ of the economic subject” but it is how people are theoretically considered within an
economic framework (Madra & Adaman, 2010, p. 1084-1085). This view is predicated on a “view of social–civil life as economic in origin” (Cook, 2008, p. 1) and the economic framework takes a position of considerable primacy as a result. One of the outcomes of this is that people become “active agents in their self-commodification” (Gammon, 2012, p. 515) because “all possible forms of sociality and being are treated as market exchanges” (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212).

I earlier drew upon the work of Chris Rojek (2010) to illustrate the increasing necessity of attending to self-presentation in everyday life. His claim is that this process changed the meaning of leisure itself, forcing it to become a sort of labor which resulted in a particular social positioning (p. 62). He explicitly links this development to neoliberal thought (p. 21) and observes that under its guidance character itself has become a “resource in the economic market and lifestyle relations” (p. 23).

Women have been particularly impacted by this evolution because while men often enjoy a more clear “delineation between work and non-work” the same cannot be said for women. Historically “cosmetics, fashion and women’s magazines” have been considered part of the “leisure industries” (Rojek, 2010, p. 39) but that changed as the ubiquity of the female body in various media worked to constrain female “access to leisure resources” (Rojek, 2010, p. 120). Keeping up with and being subjected to various media representations transformed personal fashion into a form of labor for women.

The evacuation of women’s attention to their personal appearances from the realm of leisure into the realm of labor is highly visible in The Bling Ring. The film’s characters are in a near-constant state of offering up their personal appearances, fashion, and lifestyle for consumption. Neoliberalism has worked to make these formerly leisurely activities laborious by commodifying them and the stakes are high; those who best commodity themselves are those
who may become famous. Of course, for such a system to function there must a market for such
spectacle. It comes as no surprise that the market for celebrity spectacle is strongest in those
countries which, like the United States and Britain, are most heavily influenced by neoliberalism
(Bennett, 2004, p. 138).

Seeking a feminine fame based on spectacle requires self-commodification, specifically
in regards to one’s appearance. Many of the templates for the bling ring’s self-commodification
are named in the movie. Among them are Paris Hilton, Lindsay Lohan, Audrina Patridge, and
Miranda Kerr. Each of these figures is very much so in line with traditional standards of beauty.
They are all thin, traditionally feminine, stylish, and sexual and the members of the bling ring
embody or emulate these characteristics. They flaunt their beauty, show off their possessions,
and present themselves in an often sexually charged manner.

The importance of these traits in the character’s self-presentations is woven into the
fabric of the film. In one scene, the first time Rebecca takes Marc to rob a house, they take the
home-owner’s expensive car for a joyride and Rebecca asks Marc to take her picture while she
cruises and poses like a star. One of the characters’ most frequently performed actions is to pose
for pictures with one another while in the exclusive nightclub that they are made privy to through
Chloe’s implied sexual relationship with the owner.

In one of these photographs Nicki poses by holding a large sum of money in front of her.
In the photograph she holds her mouth open with a face that suggests sexual prowess and desire,
thus explicitly linking sexual drive with money and status. At another point in the film Nicki’s
sister, Sam, declares her willingness to sleep with a man who might be able to get her into a
music video. The audience is not surprised by this; in one of the film’s opening scenes Nicki
playfully calls Sam out for being “all over that old manager guy” at a party. Throughout the film
the characters are repeatedly enthralled by the sheer volume of expensive designer clothes that they encounter in various celebrity homes. In Paris Hilton’s closets, for instance, they gleefully try on her clothes, argue over who gets to keep what, and counsel each other on what they would look best in. The characters are thus established as conventionally attractive figures who augment their appearances with the help of expensive fashion and are willing to employ their sexuality to achieve their goals. The emphasis placed on attractiveness and sexuality ties the film to a set of discourses closely related to neoliberalism: postfeminism.

**Appearances and Postfeminism**

In my discussion of postfeminism I will be drawing heavily on the work of sociologist Rosalind Gill, who has done excellent work laying out the tenants of postfeminism and relating them to neoliberalism. Her work suggests that neoliberalism might just be “*always already gendered*” with women functioning as “its ideal subjects” (2008, p. 443). Gill identifies several aspects of postfeminist discourse that are highly relevant to the present discussion (2007b, p. 149). The first of these concerns the male gaze. Gill posits that the “male judging gaze” has been internalized and made “narcissistic.” The result of this process is that the “*very subjectivity*” of women is concerned with conformance to patriarchal standards of femininity (2007b, p. 151-152). This concern gives way to a need for discipline, a second important aspect of postfeminist discourse. There has been noted a “new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture” that necessitates a constant need for attention to making sure that women look their best (2008, p. 441). The promotion of these ideals take place in the media and establish these standards as applicable to all women even as women who do not meet these particular standards are excluded from representation (2007b, p. 152).
The clear valuation of attractiveness and appearances present in this discourse points to the third and final aspect of postfeminist discourse significant for this discussion: the importance of choice. Since postfeminism has internalized both the male gaze and the need for discipline it follows that such choices must be framed as being made willingly. It is in this that we can see the most salient link between postfeminism and neoliberalism. Gill observes an “almost total evacuation of notions of politics or cultural influence” that frames the decision to chase beauty and attractiveness as one made with an unimpeachable agency (2007b, p. 153) despite the fact that women make such choices in “conditions [not] of their own making” (2007a, p. 72). Gill observes that neoliberalism has “shifted from being a political/economic rationality” and become a Foucauldian governmentality operating “across a range of social spheres”. This neoliberal governmentality is compounded by postfeminism as it brings “notions of choice, agency and autonomy” to the forefront of the “regulatory project” (2008, p. 442-443).

The type of performances the members of the bling ring deliver to achieve fame line up with the edicts of both neoliberalism and postfeminism. They participate in their own commodification and do so in very specific ways that reflect the influence of postfeminist thought. Feminine, spectacular fame is depicted as dependent on the willingness to, knowingly or not, submit to such thought and practice.

Given that the characters also augment their appearances with the help of expensive fashion items. Such items certainly display the function of bolstering the bling ring’s attractiveness and aiding them in conforming to traditional standards of beauty. However, the role of material objects in the bling ring’s quest for fame extends beyond their capacity to modify appearances. Indeed, material objects work in conjunction with various locations to provide the
members of the bling ring with something more than just increased attractiveness. This section will serve as an exploration of what precisely that something more is.

**The Power of Glamorous Objects**

Throughout *The Bling Ring* things and places are continually shown to be more than merely wielded or populated by human beings. They are shown to wield considerable power over the film’s protagonists and greatly impact their fame-seeking performances. Indeed objects and locales are shown throughout the film to be as important to the film’s protagonists as the people who possess them in prompting a desire for fame. Furthermore it is through the protagonists’ interactions with objects and locales that they are allowed to virtually live out, however briefly, the lives they desire.

An emergent field of scholarship knows as new materialism is particularly suited to address the depicted capacities of both objects and places. While non-human aspects of the material world may not possess the ability to announce themselves in the same manner as humans, new-materialist thought suggests their ability to exert considerable influence. Such influence stems from the “silent voice[s] of things themselves” which “lure us, provoke us, direct us, charm, or hex us” (Lingis, 2009, p. 274). Objects come to mean things to those who possess or encounter them and in doing so reveal their ability to “addle and rearrange thoughts and perceptions” (Bennett, 2004, p. 348) that allows such value to accrue.

These capacities are clearly visible in *The Bling Ring* and are furthermore intimately connected to the spectacle of feminine fame. The material world, in conjunction with its inhabitants, informs the type of fame desired by the film’s characters and furthermore that will aid them in their own self-commodification. To begin articulating this I first turn to Phaedra c. Pezzullo (2007), whose work provides a valuable framework from which to consider the role of
presence in the film. Pezzullo’s work nicely articulates the importance of physical locations. She describes the act of visiting a place, touring, as a performance that achieves a feeling of presence for those who undertake it (p. 9). Such an undertaking serves to the decrease psychic distance between those who travel and their destination. The Bling Ring understands this function, but reverses the equation.

Pezzullo’s work deals with toxic tourists who visit toxically assaulted communities in order that they may feel the suffering endured by their residents. It is hoped that such tours will impress upon those who take them the importance of their destinations and their inhabitants. By contrast, the characters in The Bling Ring take what may be thought of as unsanctioned tours of celebrity homes because they already consider such locations important and want to decrease their distance from them. The homes they visit are the homes of those whose lives they wish to have. They are the homes of those who matter. The affective experience evoked for these travelers is not one that functions to impress a particular meaning or significance upon them, it is instead an experience which allows the robbers to feel present in places that, for them, already matter and in fact constitute the very pinnacle of importance. Unlike toxic tourists, the bling ring does not need to be persuaded by their touring. What is being made “more tangible” (p. 9) for them are their preexisting fantasies.

Being inside Paris Hilton’s home fills the bling ring with almost tangible awe, wonder and excitement. The teenagers giddily peruse her possessions and explore the many available rooms. They hang out in her nightclub room as though it were their own. In Megan Fox’s house, Nicki lies in her bed and the expression on her face suggests that she is imagining it as her own. In another scene, Rebecca stares into Lindsay Lohan’s mirror as she sprays herself with the star’s perfume. There is no sound in this scene, and Rebecca’s stare suggests she is in something of a
trance. She is dreaming that she has come to possess Lindsay’s house, her possessions, and indeed her life itself. Of course, she has likely had such dreams countless times before but this instance is distinct because the gap between dream and reality has shrunk. The dream is no longer of an abstract place. She has experienced Lohan’s actual home, the dream is now simply that it were her own.

Moments such as these reveal the power of objects to evoke experience. Nigel Thrift has done excellent work on the topic of the capacity of objects and commodities to “animate…the body by producing an engaging and compelling ethology of the senses,” a phenomenon that points to the rise of an experience economy (2008, p. 71). In an experience economy, the value of commodities is derived from their potential to become. It is “the pull of the future” that at least in part supplies objects with value (2008, p. 31). Thrift has extended this work and addressed these issues specifically in regard to a subject of great relevance to the current discussion: glamour. He suggests that a key aspect of the construction of glamorous personas for celebrities is the fractal nature of human beings which renders them “able to incorporate others and parts of others, including objects” (2010, p. 303). In contemporary culture, he contends, the bearers of glamour are most frequently celebrities and that their “association with high-end fashion” is of great importance to their ability to function as glamorous (2010, p. 303). Glamour is essentially a “technology of allure” which “blurs the boundary between person and thing” and results in increased captivation and charm (2010, p. 291). As the bearers of glamour it is thus celebrities who possess the objects that would evoke the desired experiences of the film’s characters. The idols worshipped by the bling ring are thus not merely people, they are hybrids, fusions of human beings and objects that comprise “a form of secular magic” (2010, p. 297). The importance of objects is foregrounded by Coppola. Indeed, the opening scenes of the film are a
montage of beautiful, stolen objects including a Chanel purse, hundred dollar bills, and a diamond necklace with pink letters spelling out the phrase “rich bitch.” From the outset, then, the primacy of material objects is plainly telegraphed to the audience.

Presence in the homes of celebrities is thus not merely presence in rooms with endless amounts of glamorous objects but presence in the constituent ingredients of the bling ring’s hybrid idols. Rachel Bilson might not be there, but she’s only half of the story, and the other half is within reach. The function of this technology, however, is far greater than their fusion with human actors to create idols. The objects found in celebrity homes evoke experiences and potential futures. Glamorous objects are able to stand in for worlds that may not, and often do not, exist and evoke an “imaginary realm” (2010, p. 298) that is, despite being experienced vicariously is real because it is experienced (2010, p. 292). This observation evokes the concept of the semblance, “the experience of a virtual reality” (p. 15), put forth by Brian Massumi (2011). The virtual experience is that experience which “is never actual but always in some way in-act” and thus actually experienced (p. 19). It is precisely this type of experience, virtual experience, which Thrift (2008) discusses: experiences that are real because they are experienced, not because they are actually manifested in the world.

In the case of the bling ring, interaction with glamorous objects enacts semblances. The bling ring’s presence in the realm of glamour prompts an experienced virtual reality. The film depicts the constituent members of the bling ring admiring objects in print to suggest that various virtual realities are enacted in these instances. However, the states of frenzy and entrancement by glamorous objects that the film communicates are not achieved by merely looking at pictures of them in magazines. When looking at images, as Marc and Rebecca do in an early passage of the film, the characters maintain their typical demeanor: calm, cool, and slightly detached. When in
the presence of their desired glamorous objects, however, they are moved to a more visible state of enthralment. Presence highlights the power that objects exert over human actors, a power that cannot be adequately described in alphabetic and visual systems of meaning. The symbolic meaning of these glamorous objects remains the same whether viewing them in a magazine or actually encountering them. In either instance they signify wealth, glamour, fame, and status. However, the actually manifested encounters with such objects exposes the members of the bling ring to the “qualities…belong[ing] to [the] objects themselves rather than to [their] consciousness of them” (Thrift, 2010, p. 292). In Paris Hilton’s home the film’s characters are more than merely aware of what a pair of Louboutins means, they encounter the meaning firsthand.

*The Bling Ring* positions the feminine, performative fame with which it is concerned as intimately connected to the power of objects. The emblems of such fame are not merely people; they are human actors who have merged with material technologies of glamour. Those who aspire to such fame in the film are stirred in equal measure by those humans and objects which possess it.

*The Bling Ring* constructs feminine, performative fame as heavily concerned with self-presentation that is often mediated by the use of social media. This fixation on self-presentation reveals a strong aspect of self-commodification that is in line with the edicts of neoliberal thought. The depicted self-presentation and practices of self-commodification demonstrate concern with presenting appearances that comply with postfeminist discourses. Various material objects play a significant role in the fame that is the focus of the film. Glamorous objects join themselves with human actors to create glamorous idols, and both the human actors and the glamorous objects themselves are depicted as exerting considerable influence over those who
seek fame. Spectacular, feminine fame is furthermore depicted by the film as being a dangerous endeavor.

**A Pursuit of Danger and Passion**

Throughout *The Bling Ring* the characters’ quest for fame is repeatedly shown to be detrimental. The teenagers party like celebrities, emulating the recklessness of figures like Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton who have been arrested for drunk driving. One of the characters, Chloe, gets into a car accident and, like her idols, receives a DUI. The characters are depicted as consuming dangerous drugs like cocaine and even OxyContin. The most obvious example of harm invoked by their quest for fame is that they commit burglary and face severe legal consequences for doing so. Their quest for fame pushes them to commit dangerous and illegal actions, actions they pursue with dogged determination. Their resolve is so tenacious that they continue their crime spree even after they have been caught on camera robbing the home of Audrina Patridge!

The reckless tenacity of their quest is matched by an equal measure of their willingness to spin fame out of any situation in which they land. This latter quality is most readily displayed in the character of Nicki. She is the only member of the bling ring whose life after punishment receives any attention. The closing scene of the film is an interview with her conducted for an unnamed television program. Nicki uses this interview as an opportunity to continue positioning herself as a celebrity. She lies about her involvement in the crimes in an attempt to clean up her image. She concludes the interview, and the movie, with a line that blatantly asks the public for fame: “you can follow everything about me, and my journey, at NickiMooreForever.com.” Despite the drug abuse, public humiliation, and criminal record that her quest for fame has acquired her, she is depicted as unwilling to give it up.
At this point in the film Nicki is, in some ways, no longer seeking fame per se as much as she is seeking to maintain and increase her fame. As noted by Gary Trock, the senior news producer for TMZ, the members of the bling ring did in fact become celebrities in their own right (Ventrella, 2013). The unwillingness to part with fame is not a characteristic unique to feminine fame. Leo Braudy (1986), one of fame’s most prominent scholars, has observed that there is a long history of those who “disintegrate into a psychic mess” upon the achievement of fame (p.577). The sheer number of celebrities who have found themselves in rehab, including, Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan, Mary Kate Olsen, and Nicole Richie among many others, is a testament to this.

Chris Rojek (2006) has similarly done fascinating work detailing further many of the negative effects of acquiring celebrity. He has observed the potential of fame to push those who possess it towards increasing levels of narcissism (612). Celebrities can adopt a “drunken sense of [their own] self-importance” to the extent that they abandon common decency in their interactions with even their most precious acquaintances (p. 610-611). Further, the famous often suffer from severe intrusion into their lives. They begin to feel harassed and suffer from “annihilating feelings of nonrecognition” despite their cultural prevalence (p. 610-611).

Despite all of this, however, celebrities still often remain incredibly reluctant to relinquish their status (Rojek, 2006, p. 610). The reasons for such hesitance are obvious; celebrity provides massive wealth, public adoration, and elevation from the realm that most of us live in; it is, despite all the pain it can bring, deeply appealing. The addictive aspect of celebrity that makes it unthinkable to part with is clearly visible in *The Bling Ring*. Despite the continual barrage of danger to which their quest exposes the film’s fame-seekers, they do not give up. The
film thus constructs their relationship to fame as one of cruel optimism, as put forth by Lauren Berlant (2011).

**A Relationship of Cruel Optimism**

A relationship of cruel optimism is enacted in instances where an individual desires something that is “actually an obstacle to [their] flourishing” (p. 1). Berlant further discusses relations of cruel optimism as existing when an actor consistently returns to a particular fantasy expecting a desired change to come about when it is in fact not possible. Furthermore, the relationship to such fantasies begins to characterize the way one lives their life. The illusion of possibility becomes sustaining even as it damages (2). One of the relations of cruel optimism mentioned by Berlant is the fantasy of upward mobility (3), a quest which is unavoidably related to the pursuit of fame.

The propensity to return to a damaging fantasy even as a source of sustenance in the hope of a better future is readily on display in *The Bling Ring*. All of these characteristics are readily on display in *The Bling Ring*. The film’s central characters are all shown to structure their lives around the fantasy of achieving fame. The film’s characters spend their evenings in clubs hoping to meet photographers and managers, much of their conversation consists of dreaming about and plotting for famous futures for themselves, and at least one of the characters uses her criminal status as a bid for further fame. The fantasy of fame does more than merely guide these characters; it repeatedly exposes them to considerable danger and yet simultaneously allows them to push the consequences out of their minds. It sustains them. They seem their happiest when they are the closest to fame; inside the homes of the famous, plotting to commit further crimes, dangerously partying in the style of celebuantes, or flaunting their proximity to the famous to those around them. It is in moments such as these that the characters paradoxically
seem to be most alive. That it is these very actions hindering their growths establishes the bling ring’s relationship to fame as being resolutely cruelly optimistic.

*The Bling Ring* establishes feminine fame as a type of fame that entails a desire that burns so brightly as to be unhealthy and posits it as a fundamentally dangerous endeavor. Feminine fame is presented as entailing submission to both neoliberal and postfeminist principles. However, none of the aspects put forth in this film as integral to feminine fame are necessarily posited as *exclusive* to feminine fame. The monitoring of self-presentation and the act of self-commodification are central to the very concept of fame regardless of gender. Furthermore, since celebrities are sold to a public they necessarily are always to some degree submitting to discourses that dictate what will sell; celebrities are typically quite attractive in very traditional ways. The dangers of fame, across all sorts of fame, have likewise been well documented. In light of this, what defines feminine fame as put forth by *The Bling Ring* is not merely the presence of all of these factors. The film defines its subject not just by presence but also by absence. The most noticeable absence in the film’s construction of feminine fame is the absence of passion for anything other than fame itself. The film’s characters have a singular interest in fame. The propensity of female celebrities to be turned into spectacle has been discussed previously in this project. Such a fate stands in contrast with male celebrities, who are much more likely to be regarded as “serious stars with careers” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). Male celebrities enjoy attention that is focused on their activity rather than their appearances (Edwards, 2013, p. 163). The differentiation in the type of attention given to celebrities coded as masculine and feminine actively impact their consumption. Women are thus often placed in a position where if they are to consume celebrity they often must engage “with a world of looks…and
emotion centered on the home, relationships, and fashion” (Edwards, 2013, p. 163) instead of worlds of other, more traditionally respected activities.

The characters in *The Bling Ring* have thoroughly accepted these observations as the standards by which feminine fame is defined. Female celebrities are often reduced to spectacle and their appearances despite their commitment to any number of particular crafts; serious actresses and musicians are routinely featured in magazines, not for their craft, but for their appearances and fashion. What the bling ring has done, like their idols Paris Hilton and Audrina Patridge, is preempted such a reduction from occurring by being, from the beginning, nothing more than appearances and spectacle.

The strategy of these characters is to build a career, a fame, based solely on their stylized performances. They are thus defined by a lack of concern for anything other than fame itself and their own self-presentations. In many ways they are “serious stars with careers” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156) but, like their idols, they would likely never be received as such because what it is that they are serious about is spectacle and performance. As I discussed in the previous chapter, there is a degree of unfairness to such judgments. Celebrities whose fame is based on performance are often subject to denigration for lacking talent, and held up as symbols of cultural decay. In this instance some of those charges are warranted; the bling ring, after all, was a criminal group, certainly indicative of slumping moral standards. However, their embrace of appearances and spectacle ensured that, even absent criminal activity, the members of the bling ring would never be granted any significant measure of respectability. For whatever reason, many refuse to recognize performances outside of discrete performative acts as requiring talent.

The absences that define the vision of fame is set forth by *The Bling Ring* include the absence of any discrete performative act. The characters are pursuing a fame rooted entirely in
spectacle and performance. They are thus likewise defined by an absence of concern for anything other than spectacle and performance, and furthermore, a lack of concern for anything other than the fame that may result from such things. Finally, the motivations and tactics of the bling ring, even barring their criminal nature, ensure that the mode of fame they seek is defined by a lack of respectability.

**Conclusion**

*The Bling Ring* is a document of an actual event that stands as a powerful testament to celebrity obsession in the 21st century. By engaging that event in a manner that is strongly attuned to the tale’s insights to modern fame, the film is able to reveal quite a bit about the type of fame with which it deals. The film’s characterization of feminine fame suggests that it is concerned primarily with self-presentation, and frequently employs social media as an aid in such activity. Second, the self-presentation quite often doubles as self-commodification, a fact that reveals feminine fame to participate in the principles put forth by neoliberalism. Third, the content of the self-presentation and commodification reveal a strong emphasis to be placed on the role of appearances. The attention to appearances, and the narrow standards of beauty on display, reveals a submission to postfeminist ideals. A fourth aspect of feminine fame displayed in the film is the role of material objects. Glamorous objects come to fuse with and help define those who wear them, are revealed to be desired to the same degree as the human actors who wear them, and are shown to exert strong influence and power over those who desire them. A fifth aspect of the feminine fame posited by *The Bling Ring* lies in its depiction of feminine fame’s pursuit as an inherently dangerous endeavor that is at the same time not easily given up. The quest for fame is, in *The Bling Ring*, a quest that entails dedication, even in times when the quest is increasingly dangerous and unhealthy. It is the strength of the desire for fame that
establishes feminine fame as entailing a relationship of cruel optimism. My analysis finally showed that this film positions feminine fame as being defined by multiple absences. Feminine fame does not care about anything other than being famous, it achieves fame absent anything other than stylized performance, and it ultimately, as a consequence of these choices and prevalent cultural biases, is received with a dearth of respect.
Chapter 3: *Hustle & Flow*

The very nature of fame and celebrity has changed. The process of this change transpired throughout the 20th century as the nature of the attention given to public figures increasingly came to emphasize their personal lives and activities ancillary to what I have labeled as *discrete performative acts*. I have argued that in the opening stretches of the 21st century the changes culminated in what I have termed a *performative turn* in celebrity that has opened the door for the prominence of many celebrities who have built their careers on general, *stylized performances of life*. Fame’s performative turn has thus far been shown to have ramifications primarily for female celebrities, and in fact performative fame has been theorized as a primarily feminine endeavor. In the previous chapter I interrogated Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* to lay bare some of the mechanics and features that are central to feminine fame after the performative turn. The work of this chapter is to conduct rhetorical criticism of another film whose narrative concerns the quest for a masculine fame. The film in question is Craig Brewer’s 2005 *Hustle & Flow*, which offers a tale of the pursuit of a traditional fame that does not rely primarily on stylized performance.

*Hustle & Flow* was released in the summer of 2005 to generally positive reviews and while it was not a blockbuster, it had considerable success considering the film’s relatively small budget and some of the film’s documented difficulties in securing a financial backer (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006b). The film was later nominated for the Academy Awards for best actor and best original song, ultimately winning in the latter category. The song for which it won the Academy Award is entitled “It’s Hard out Here for a Pimp” and it is a crucial element of the film. Djay is the film’s protagonist, and the film is the story of his pursuit of a rap career. He begins the film as a rundown pimp without much to his name and throughout the opening stretch
of the film dissatisfaction with his life slowly comes into sharp view. His remedy to his dilemma is to draw upon his life experiences and begin recording music in hopes of making it as a rapper. In this chapter I inquire as to how the film structures the quest for masculine fame. I first outline the process through which I arrived at this film for analysis.

**Difficulties in Studying Masculine Fame**

I found it challenging to find an artifact that deals with masculine narratives of fame-seeking. There is a far greater propensity to make the intersections of femininity and fame into spectacle and thus tales of famous women abound. By comparison, there are far fewer similar stories about men seeking fame during the years following fame’s performative turn. There are plentiful biopics which tell the stories of men seeking fame throughout various periods in history. Two noteworthy examples of films of this sort are *Ray* and *Walk the Line*. Another category I considered were films about figures that rise to fame through sports. However, in such films there is often a lack of emphasis placed on fame because it is constructed as incidental to the protagonists’ love of and skill regarding a particular sport. It seems possible to conclude that there is less interest in telling stories about men seeking fame because masculine fame is not centered on spectacle. *Hustle & Flow* is virtually the only artifact that fulfills the narrative requirements of this project that reached any sort of audience.

**The Pursuit of Masculine Fame**

In this chapter I will first argue that the film depicts the quest for masculine fame as an endeavor which is dependent on discrete performative acts as opposed to the stylized performances of life which define feminine fame. The importance of discrete performative acts will be related to the issue of respectability, which is argued to be of primary importance to masculine fame. The seeker of masculine fame is demonstrated to be a figure that is concerned
with proving his charisma, his worth and skill, in a meritocratic system through the employment of a discrete performative act in the service of creating works of art which are of high quality and hold the potential to do important cultural work.

I will further argue that by positioning the fame-seeker as a figure of such importance, the film justifies the subordination of each of his associates to his quest. A hyper-subordination occurs along gendered lines. While the subordination of the film’s male characters still allows them to maintain a collaborative relationship with the fame-seeker that affirms their status as active producers, the same courtesy is not extended to the film’s women. The film’s subordination of women reduces them to their bodies and to spectacle, and thus reflects and reinforces larger cultural practices which rely on a variety of practices to preserve a monopoly on respectability for men.

Finally, I argue that the subordination of the film’s supporting characters is a necessary action because of the film’s generic commitments. As a tale of fame-seeking and the enactment of the American Dream, the film must position its protagonist as a heroic, worthy individual. This necessary ordination of the male character and subordination of women, however, is complicated by competing needs to both honor the contributions of the film’s supporting characters and to preserve the protagonist’s likeability by avoiding conflict over status between them. The film manages these competing tensions and needs, I assert, by clinging to an “individualistic variant” of the American Dream that emphasizes the heroic individual while simultaneously resisting its call to categorize actors as either heroes or failures (Rowlands & Jones, 2011, p. 133). The film introduces a third category, the hero’s helpers, and this category manages to preserve both the fame-seeker’s likeability and status as heroic, worthy individual.
The Importance of Respectability

*Hustle & Flow* depicts the quest for masculine fame as one with fundamentally different motivations than the quest for feminine fame. In *The Bling Ring* the pursuit of fame was positioned as an endeavor undertaken as an attempt to fulfill a culturally instilled lack (Couldry, 2012, p. 93). The film contained no explicit consideration by the characters of what precisely it was that acquiring fame would do for them because it was treated as possessing *inherent* value. By contrast, *Hustle & Flow* frames the pursuit of masculine fame as the quest for something with *instrumental* value. Djay, the film’s protagonist, does not seek fame for fame’s sake; he has two very specific motivations for wanting to become a celebrity. First, acquiring fame is a means to a better life, and second, fame holds the potential to allow Djay the opportunity to prove his worth and skill. Djay is portrayed as a run-down pimp who lives in poverty and has little potential for socioeconomic advancement and demonstrable achievement, and it is fame that may remedy this situation.

It is the latter of these two motivations that inform the methods through which Djay seeks fame. While Djay may be searching for a means to increase his socioeconomic status, this goal is tempered by the drive to do so through means which are respectable. In contrast, the stylized life performances that comprise feminine fame do not consist of respected practices; the embrace of spectacle tends to be frowned upon by many cultural critics. It is thus unsurprising that in Djay’s quest for fame, he heavily emphasizes his skill at rapping, a discrete performative act. Discrete performative acts are regarded much more highly than the spectacle surrounding stylized performances of life. The move away from discrete performative acts informs the relatively dismissive claims of scholars like Daniel Boorstin that celebrity has become reliant on “manufacture rather than merit” (Bell, 2010, p. 1). The framing of manufacture and merit as
mutually exclusive concepts bestows the aura of respectability to discrete performative acts. Respectability is a top priority in Djay’s quest.

The emphasis placed on respectability and artistic skill in the film’s construction of masculine fame is most clearly evident in a scene that transpires late in the film in an exchange between Djay and another character named Skinny Black. Both Djay and Skinny Black grew up in Memphis and were DJs in different parts of town. Though they did not know each other, Djay knew of Black and is reminded of his existence when he discovers that he has become a famous rapper. He further discovers that Black is going to come back to Memphis and host a private Fourth of July party at a local club owned by one of Djay’s associates. Djay sets about creating a tape of rap tracks to give to Black at the forthcoming party in the hope that he will aid him in getting his music heard and establishing himself as a musical force. When Djay finally gets the opportunity to meet with Black, he praises his work and expresses his desire to make music of a similar quality. While doing so, he delivers a beautiful speech to Black regarding the power of music. He claims that years from now when a new civilization has arisen and its inhabitants want to know about Memphis, they would need look no further than Black’s first rap release. It is this kind of work that Djay wants his music to do. Furthermore, accomplishing this goal, and acquiring fame in the process, is posited as being most valuable when it is done because of the possession of skill. Djay tells Black that it is not enough for a man to climb Mt. Everest; he must do it with as few tools as possible.

The film thus positions its fame seeker as keenly aware of the artistic prowess and power of music to represent the “collective history, beliefs and knowledge systems” (Mans, 2007, p. 248) of the culture from which it emerges. Djay wants to make music that does this work and furthermore wants his accomplishment of such a task to be driven by his own artistic prowess.
Fame, in addition to being the avenue to a better life, is the means through which Djay’s important message and considerable skill may be recognized and remembered. It is the key to symbolic immortality, a motive of fame discussed by media psychologist David Giles (2006, p. 481-482), and which Djay seems to possess. Djay’s theoretical well-known-ness would be fame in the sense of the word employed by cultural studies scholar Liesbet van Zoonen (2006), who defines it as publicity that allows for the “public recognition of exceptional achievements” (p. 291). The drive possessed by Djay to prove, and receive recognition for, his value and skill reveals the ways in which *Hustle & Flow* conceives of the pursuit of masculine fame as an endeavor of charisma.

Charisma is a recurring subject in academic discussions of celebrity (Dyer, 2006, p. 159; Williams, 2006, p. 376; Alberoni, 2006, p. 110; Gamson, 2007, p. 147; Wang, 2007, p. 332). It is though the work of Max Weber that the term came to be of such relevance in regards to the subject of celebrity. Though his work concerned leadership rather than celebrity per se, Weber’s notion of charisma has been utilized in the study of celebrity because there is great continuity between fame and the style of leadership with which he was concerned. Weber’s work dealt with the emergence of leaders throughout history whose influence was not derived from traditional power structures (2006b, p. 55). The charismatic leader instead derived influence from proving their “strength in life” (2006b, p. 58), a process that required them to be “at least specifically exceptional” and possess qualities that the “ordinary person” cannot (2006a, p. 61). Celebrities likewise “do not occupy institutional positions of power” granted to them by state authority (Alberoni, 2006, p. 109), but instead acquire their cultural cachet from their ability to win over audiences.
At first glance the concept of charisma may appear to be more relevant to feminine fame because it seems to deemphasize the craft associated with discrete performative acts by relying more on the “commodified magnetism” that Rojek (2012) claims as defining modern usages of the term (p. 63). Rojek may be correct in asserting that charisma no longer has ties to the notions of “torrential force” that defined the “classical charisma” possessed by leaders whose powers were moved beyond being “merely finite” and took on “unfathomable or revolutionary” qualities (p. 63). I argue, however, that by characterizing modern conceptions of charisma as pertaining to a quality that is largely manufactured by the formidable “presentation skills of the PR-Media hub” (p. 65) he overlooks the important connections that still exist between the notions of charisma and proving oneself.

As Williams (2006) notes, charismatic systems are in place when the perceived achievements and ability of individuals provide them with structural elevation (p. 376). These systems have arisen because charisma, as Weber (2006a) points out, can become routinized. Charismatic figures may be come to be sought “on the basis of criteria of the qualities” which are alleged to make those who possess them good fits for a particular position (p. 65). Williams (2006) labels such systems of routinized charisma star systems and draws upon the work of established scholar of fame P. David Marshall in discussing the ways in which “varied, largely self-defined and autonomous systems of celebrity” are present “across contemporary life” and are specifically visible in the communities of various professions (p. 376). The achievement of star status in these communities depends on meeting a set of “structurally mandated and naturalized” practices which purportedly measure the competency of those subject to them (p. 376). What is most important for my present concern is the “fame-based” nature of these charismatic systems. By their very design they offer reputation and “name recognition” as a
reward for the demonstration of ability to meet particular standards of excellence (p. 376). Williams offers up academia as an example of a modern charismatic system because it offers people reputation and job security on the basis of their ability to demonstrate their research skills (p. 376).

Charismatic systems are those which offer fame to those who prove themselves; they are meritocratic. Charisma is thus aligned with the notion of meritocracy and it is this alignment which excludes many practitioners of feminine fame from being declared to possess charisma because their means of acquiring fame are not culturally recognized as meritorious within the charismatic structures currently in place. While a practitioner of feminine fame may indeed acquire an audience, they cannot be said to do so by proving themselves to be “at least specifically exceptional” (Weber, 2006a, p. 61) because the spectacle upon which they build themselves is not culturally coded as meritorious. Indeed, condemnations of feminine fame as symptomatic of a society “too dumb to wipe itself out” (Wolcott, 2009) do not point towards the strength of those who possess feminine fame, but to the weakness of a culture that offers them their position. Feminine fame is thus only conceived of as charismatic if we allow an evacuation of the importance of merit, defined as discrete performative acts in this context, from the concept.

A truly charismatic system is one which “structurally elevates particular individuals” because of their perceived achievements and ability (Williams, 2006, p. 376). Masculine fame may thus be fairly called charismatic because it acquires an audience and does so by employing culturally respectable discrete performative acts. Merit and respectability are thus central to the concept of charisma and are accordingly highly visible in the film. This indeed is the rubric of a meritocracy under which Djay operates. Djay’s quest is informed by the principle of wanting to
prove his “strength in life” (Weber, 2006b, p. 58). Not only will his music do important work, it will come into existence because of his skill.

The emphasis placed on production and meritocracy recalls the work of film scholars Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer (2011), who undertook the project of surveying contemporary cinema and cataloguing different ways in which it manages masculinity. They have produced a fascinating index of various forms of masculinity that arose in cinema during the Clinton and Bush administrations that includes considerations of fatherhood, romantic companionship, and superheroes. None of the templates they have put forth can be used fully to describe Djay; however, one of their archetypes of masculinity, the loser, does provide a valuable referent for understanding how his character operates within the film’s narrative.

The loser is a protagonist who stands firmly opposite other forms of cinematic masculinity. He is not thriving and his prospects at advancement seem minimal until some boon in his life, often the love of a woman, helps carry him into manhood (p. 203). The status of the United States as a meritocracy is central to many incarnations of the loser’s tale (p. 199). Movies involving losers often portray them as proving their merit and coming to a state where they are thriving and fulfilled through an often complex series of events. Djay is not quite compatible with any of the multiple, overlapping, conceptions of the loser primarily because his transformation is enacted by the production of his music rather than by romantic love. Nonetheless, the film does maintain an emphasis on the protagonist’s quest to prove himself worthy in a meritocratic system: Djay seeks to become more than he is and to overcome his less than ideal circumstances.

Music is the means through which Djay attempts to accomplish this feat. As Edwards (2013) notes, masculine fame is primarily “predicated upon a defensive assertion of activity” (p. 158). Djay accordingly is depicted as an active producer of external works. He logs long hours in
his home-studio and is shown frequently writing down lyrics on a pad of that paper he keeps readily available at seemingly all times. Clear importance is placed on his capabilities as a musical artist. Djay’s personal life and his various self-presentations are not of importance except as they function as resources in bolstering the credibility of what he produces. The film makes it clear that the music which Djay creates tells a story that mimics the story of his life; his song lyrics describe conditions and events we see him live out. The value of his songwriting is reinforced by the fact that he has lived the experiences about which he is rapping. He is able to create music which preserves the culture of his hometown because his experiences are intimately connected to this culture. As Marshall (2006) observes, it is of particular importance for musical celebrities to “be a virtual member of his or her own audience” to establish their authenticity (p. 204). His personal life takes on relevance to the degree that it gives his produced art the authority to represent a culture. This contrasts with practitioners of feminine fame, whose personal lives function as “tourist sight[s]” for voyeuristic audiences (Hillyer, 2010, p. 20). The relationship between Djay’s art and life establishes him as a hybrid figure, synthesizing two categories of masculine fame that cultural and arts scholar Christine Geraghthy (2007) has theorized: the star as professional and performer. While Geraghty’s work deals with film stardom, her categories extend to musical fame as well, as evidenced by the film’s positioning of Djay in exactly this manner.

The professional category relies on the existence of contiguity between a star’s perceived persona and the type of roles a star plays (p. 101-102). Thus Djay is a professional because his theoretical stardom will make “sense through the combination of [his] star image with a particular…context” (p.101). The authenticity of his work requires his image and life experience to line up with the community from which he draws his audience. However, Djay also seeks to
function as a performer because the performer receives attention and praise for “performance and work” rather than merely his identity (p. 103). Djay thus synthesizes the importance of continuity between art and image and the significance of visible skill and effort. Instead of using his self as something to be commodified for its own sake, as in feminine fame, he channels his life experiences and talent to create a work of art. The validity of the resultant work is then corroborated by the continuity between itself and its creator.

Self-presentation is largely disregarded by the film. It is only attended to on one occasion, and it is only attended to then because on this occasion it has the potential to aid in acquiring a larger audience for Djay’s art. This singular occasion transpires just before Djay leaves his home to attend Skinny Black’s party. He has dressed himself nicely and as he is leaving he is stopped by Shug, one of his former prostitutes who is still living with him while she is pregnant. She tells him that she has been watching music videos and has noticed that all of the rappers in them have chains, expensive pieces of jewelry that bear their name or an imprint that is iconic to them. She has purchased him such a chain, demonstrating her recognition of the importance of these pieces of iconography in the performances of the rap fame that Djay seeks.

Two aspects of this gift are of particular importance. First, it is not done for its own sake but rather as a credibility booster that help expose Djay’s art to wider audiences. Second, this lone instance is initiated by someone other than Djay himself, and furthermore, a woman. Djay does not spend much time cultivating a particular image as he seeks to establish fame. Instead he spends his time and attention making music; writing lyrics, holding long recording sessions in his home-studio, and discussing what types of songs would garner the most radio play. When he is not working on his music, he is selling women or drugs to afford his pursuit. He is only shown
to be concerned with networking to get an audience with Skinny Black in order to give Black his music in hopes that it will be passed on.

*Hustle & Flow* constructs the quest for masculine fame as a respectable endeavor that relies primarily on discrete performative acts. Reliance on discrete performative acts stems from the desire for both cultural importance and respectability presented in charismatic systems as central to quests for masculine fame. Pursuing masculine fame entails the demonstration of charisma, through the production of the quality works required to succeed in a meritocratic system. Accordingly, presentations of self and the personal life of the fame seeker are of minor significance to the degree that they bolster the discrete performative act in terms of its credibility or chance at success.

**Masculine Fame Justifies Subordination**

Audiences are pushed to identify with Djay, the film’s fame-seeker. The film unequivocally positions him as the hero. Any doubts about such a positioning are quelled by a consultation of the bonus features included on the film’s DVD release. In a miniature documentary entitled *Behind the Hustle* there is an interview with Stephanie Allain, one of the film’s producers, who openly and frequently refers to him as the film’s hero (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006a). In sum, *Hustle & Flow* positions its fame-seeker as a figure who wields both the necessary skill and life experience to create a work which may preserve the culture from which he has emerged. It is the possession of talent, conceived of as a discrete performative act, and artistic vision that establishes Djay’s status as a hero. I argue here that the film uses Djay’s hero-making talent and vision to justify the subordination of his associates. Subordination is not unilateral, but instead is organized along gendered lines to preserve the status of men as producers while reducing women to embodied spectacle.
All of Djay’s associates are subordinated to him in some manner. The framing of masculine fame in *Hustle & Flow* thus bears some similarities to the vision of feminine fame put forth by *The Bling Ring*. In each presentation of fame, the fame-seekers’ quests are portrayed as all-consuming to the extent that they facilitate behavior which subordinates all others to their cause. The presentations of fame diverge, however, because *The Bling Ring* never justifies the behavior of its protagonists; in other words, their egregious acts are not granted immunity because their end goal is fundamentally selfish. While Djay’s pursuit is far from selfless, the film constructs his quest as one that will result in what is construed as a genuine cultural contribution. Furthermore, the film commits an inoculation, similar to what is discussed by critical and cultural theorist Chela Sandoval (2000), against the conclusion that either Djay’s character or quest for fame is entirely selfish by establishing a familial overtone to the relationships that he has with his associates. Such a move allows Djay to “remain as is” because those subordinate to him are regarded as familial; they are “recognized” even as they are “tamed” (Sandoval, 2000, p. 118-119). The audience is invited to view Djay as care-taker in a harsh system, the principal evil of which is concealed by the film’s insistence that what really matters is not Djay’s participation in an inherently unethical system, but his ability to establish familial relationships within it (Sandoval, 2000, p. 119).

The film depicts Djay as incredibly abusive to his prostitutes, yet simultaneously to have a contradictory, sincere sense of familial loyalty to them. The film depicts a pimp-prostitute relationship much like the one described by Williamson & Cluse-Tolar (2002) wherein prostitutes earn the pimps’ “love” by paying with their “sheer tenacity to work and bring him the money” they earn (p. 1085). The prostitutes who have remained loyal to Djay are afforded considerable benefits; they appear successful in their endeavors to win his love. They and their
children live with Djay. Far from merely protecting them as they prostitute, he provides them with a roof over their heads. He even allows Shug to live with him while pregnant, even though she will be unable to earn him any more money. Another prostitute, Nola, also lives with him and, despite a few moments of considerable tension throughout the film, she is fiercely loyal to Djay. In addition to living under his roof, Nola continually is made to feel important by Djay in exchange for her loyalty; he repeatedly emphasizes that they are a team and refers to her as his “primary investor” as he pursues fame. The film thus invokes the standard particular relationship between pimp and prostitute wherein prostitutes receive care and attention from their pimp in return for their subordination and loyalty. The film implies that Djay’s success brings good things to the prostitutes in his life, assuming that they maintain their loyalty and subordination to him.

*Hustle & Flow* also portrays Djay’s relationships with his music producers as operating in a similarly familial, though less dominating, register. Throughout the film he is depicted as being a confidant and friend to his male collaborators, Key and Shelby. They labor with him as he records songs, and when the movie finally culminates in his music receiving radio play they are shown to be very proud, not just of Djay, but of themselves as well. Their pride illustrates the fact that the task undertaken in the film has emotional significance for all of the parties involved with the film’s hero.

The film’s framing of Djay as possessing a generous spirit and sense of kinship, and the degree of importance which it assigns to his quest, allows for the subordination of each of his associates. Both Djay and his vision are established as being worthy and requiring subordination. The justified subordination, however, is enacted differently across gendered positions.
Male associates present in the film work hard on Djay’s music. While one of them, Key, is portrayed as using the experience as a means to reinvigorate his life, each character remains nonetheless subordinated to Djay because their hard work is performed in service of his ambitions to tell his unique story. Their subordination to his artistic vision, however, is not mirrored completely in their interactions with Djay. The film depicts their relationship to Djay as distinctly collaborative. They help him finesse his songs to a point where radio play becomes viable, they help him build his studio, and they push him towards producing music of a higher quality. They remain active agents and producers whose input is valued in the quest for respectable, charismatic masculine fame.

By contrast, the women in his life, his prostitutes, help him by following orders. The role of Djay’s women is typically to help fund his quest for fame. The isolated instances wherein they contribute to the process of making music take on a different tone from parallel instances wherein Djay’s male collaborators contribute to his music. For instance, Djay instructs Shug to sing the choruses on his songs. She is given lines to sing and he instructs her as to how to sing them.

Her role in this creative process is mirrored by the lyrics she is asked to sing; the main line of one of her choruses is “it’s hard out here for a pimp.” The lyrics position the man who has sold her body as having a difficult life worthy of being given attention while completely sidelining her story as one of the women he has abused. Furthermore, the film depicts Shug as being deeply moved by the opportunity to participate in the creation of a song celebrating the struggles of a man who sells her body. The film thus suggests the suitability of a woman’s body as a site to generate revenue for a man’s worthy pursuit of telling his story. Here, the wholesale reduction of the women in Djay’s life to their bodies in service of his mission is blatantly
depicted. This move clearly mirrors the cultural tendency to reduce women to spectacle and preserve an incomplete, perhaps, monopoly on respectable fame for men.

Masculine fame has a long history of relying on the reduction of women to their bodies. Famous men have a relative monopoly on being considered “serious stars with careers” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). A brief look at who is canonized corroborates this conclusion. *Premiere* magazine, an important film publication, released a list of the 100 greatest film performances of all time wherein 61% of the entries were performances given by men (*Premiere* magazine, n.d.) Similarly, when *RollingStone* released its list of the 100 greatest artists of all time it was even more thoroughly dominated by men (*RollingStone* magazine, n.d.). When famous women do receive “mass media exposure” it is typically concerned with the ways in which they manage and modify their bodies and appearances (van Zoonen, 2006, p. 291-292). This tendency is exemplified in the practices of the popular press following major awards shows like the Academy Awards. It is traditional practice to release best dressed lists after such events and the emphasis on women seen in these lists is staggering. Men enjoy awards shows as opportunities to be honored for their work. Women may not necessarily be excluded from this enjoyment, however, with it necessarily comes the close scrutiny of their appearances and fashion choices.

This dominant cultural tendency is mirrored in *Hustle & Flow*. Just as the reduction of famous women to embodied spectacle reserves a monopoly on respectability for masculine fame, it is the reduction of the film’s women to their bodies that grants Djay access to a respectable fame. The film allows Djay to rely on their labor and the male gaze in order to pursue his career.

Classic work on the male gaze has been produced in regards to cinema by Laura Mulvey (1999). The more recent work of Rosalind Gill (2007b) extends Mulvey’s work to suggest that the power of the male gaze is far from relegated to the cinematic realm. Indeed, Gill posits the male gaze as
functioning in everyday life, guided in part by media representations (p. 152). Given this, and that men are less likely to be judged by their appearance than women (Davis, 2006, p. 560), men are likely to deflect objectifying gazes in life the same way that, as Richard Dyer (1982) explains, they do in print. One of fame’s most established scholars, Dyer undertook a comparison of male and female pinup photographs and observed a deflection or denial of “the viewer’s gaze” (p. 66) in the photographs of men. He found that frequently pictures of men found them “caught in the middle of an action” and thus emphasized their status as doers, standing in sharp contrast to the pictures of women that portray them as “just there to be looked at” (p. 67). Djay’s lack of concern with his own spectacle might be viewed as a similar aversion of the gaze because he desires to be perceived as an active doer. He wishes to be known, not for his appearance or “commodified magnetism” (Rojek, 2012, p. 63), but for his discrete performative act; the proof of his “strength in life” (Weber, 2006b, p. 58).

The enterprise depicted in Hustle & Flow could not function in a society that did not spend so much time emphasizing the “decorative…power” of women enumerated by Susan J. Douglas (2010, p. 5). Djay can sell women because he lives in a culture that commodifies female bodies at every turn. This is most clearly depicted in one harrowing series of events. During a recording session Key tells Djay that they need a higher quality microphone with which to record. Djay responds by ordering Nola, one of his prostitutes, to sleep with the owner of a sound equipment store in order to procure such a microphone. When she protests her resistance is met with harsh orders that overrule her objections. After this scene she is visibly upset and confronts Djay. He reassures her by telling her lies that he will take her shopping the next day. She tells him that she knows he is manipulating her. Despite her apparent knowledge, she is shown to be visibly proud that he refers to her as his “primary investor.” Later, when Djay goes to jail in the
closing stretches of the film, she is depicted as quite eager to take up the task of getting his music on the radio. Throughout the film, Djay is depicted as trying to make her feel like she is a partner in his operation and she is depicted as pleased to be acknowledged in this way, despite the fact that her role is to sell her body so he can pursue his dream. Djay’s manipulation of Nola is emblematic of the tendency of pimps to alternate between affection and cruelty in order to get what they want out of their prostitutes (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002, p. 1085), and justified in the film by familial and collaborative frames.

The willingness of the film to depict the harsh realities of the pimp-prostitute relationship would not be so problematic if the film did not implicitly validate scenarios like the one described. In contrast, it would be quite plausible for the film to depict a scenario such as this in a detached manner that distanced viewers from this objectification. Similarly, it is plausible that the film could work with similar scenarios and cast a questioning gaze on the actions of a pimp like Djay. The film declines both of these frames in favor of a hero frame. The film’s construction of masculine fame emerges as one that affirms the subjugation of the feminine.

Previously, I referred to an interview with Stephanie Allain, one of the film’s producers, that was included on the film’s DVD release in which Allain referenced Djay as the film’s “hero.” This proclamation is doubly damning in light of the fact that it immediately follows her recounting of what was, for me, the film’s most traumatic scene. The scene in question depicts Djay throwing a prostitute named Lexus and her child out of his house in a terrifying, violent manner and destroying much of her property in the process. His action is prompted by her anger at him for failing to keep a promise that he made to her: to pick her up from the strip club where she performs and prostitutes. In Allain’s interview, she openly recognizes Djay as an abuser of
women, yet she continues to refer to him as a hero and justifies his treatment of Lexus as necessary on the grounds of her lack of belief in him (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006a).

The film never engages Djay’s actions on moral grounds. It lets his actions be harrowing aspects of a dramatic story without ever allowing them to impugn Djay’s character, or indeed masculine fame itself. Brewer, the film’s director, never wants you to doubt that Djay is a good person who cares about the women he abuses. Furthermore, the film does not merely refrain from criticizing Djay for his treatment of the women in his life; it actively positions him in a positive light. He is portrayed as inclusive because he allows the women he prostitutes to participate in his quest for fame; Nola is pleased to be his primary investor and Shug is deeply touched by her opportunity to sing Djay’s hooks. This perspective on his character is given the ultimate validation when, in the film’s final act, Shug and Djay fall in love. Their first kiss, which begins their relationship, transpires after she gives him the chain that he wears to meet Skinny Black. It is symbolic that love between these two characters surfaces immediately after she helps him in his quest for fame. He loves her for always putting him first, and she loves him for subordinating her to his dreams.

The film’s unflinching promotion of the subjugation of women to men reflects more than the cultural tendency to reduce women to embodied spectacle. It also mirrors another prevalent feature of contemporary life: the post-feminist inflected notion that to become part of the spectacle is indeed every woman’s calling. The previously mentioned Lexus is the only woman in the film to take legitimate issue with the way Djay treats her. Shug falls in love with Djay and Nola, while intermittently upset with Djay’s actions, nonetheless remains fiercely loyal to him and his cause. They embrace their subservient status as spectacle, reflecting an internalization of the male gaze (Gill, 2007b, p.152). As Douglas (2010) notes, women are frequently encouraged to abandon the pursuit of typically male dominated positions under the guise that real equality
has already been achieved and because “being decorative” turned out to be the “highest form of power” for women after all (p. 5). Men, all the while, maintain the luxury of caring substantially less about their appearances (Davis, 2006, p. 559). Brewer (2006) provides a director’s commentary of the film on its DVD release and in his commentary he makes explicit these attitudes about the proper role for women. He unabashedly states that the film is a “woman get behind your man” story. Of course, he claims to not be taking anything away from women; rather, he claims to be merely telling a story that depicts how special it is to a man to have the support of a woman he loves and respects. Brewer seems blithely unaware of the tension that exists between respect and prostitution.

It is unsurprising, then, that these attitudes permeate the entire film. The subordination of women depicted in the film is not limited to the actions of Djay but also reflected in the character Key, one of Djay’s music producers. While Key is not the focal point of the story, he also is attempting to reinvigorate his life by becoming a music producer. His aims are less explicit than Djay’s; we do not know if he craves fame, more money, or simply a more enjoyable occupation. Whatever the case, his pursuit of a production career also requires the subordination of his wife, Yevette, to his goals. Her subordination is distinct only in that her reduction is to a passive wife rather than to embodied spectacle.

Rather than being reduced to embodied spectacle, the character of Yevette is required to defer her sense of right and wrong, as well as her claim to any role in the determination of the path that her and Key’s life as a married couple should take. The film demonstrates that Yevette is uncomfortable with her husband’s new career ambitions; she does not like him spending his time in a house full of prostitutes. She is dissatisfied with the increasing amount of time he spends away from home. Key is depicted as displaying little need to validate or comfort her
while she struggles with his career decisions; in one heated telephone argument he yells “because I said so” before hanging up on her. The couple eventually reconciles, but only because Yevette completely cedes to his desires. No reconciliatory dialogue ever transpires between the two; instead she decides to surprise her husband by bringing him and everyone else at Djay’s house dinner during a recording session. When she arrives, she is visibly nervous and tentative. Sensing this, the other characters invite her to stay. This invitation is treated as Key’s act of reconciliation to her. She sits lovingly next to him, excited to be included as he helps Djay record a song about a pimp “spitting game” to his “hos.”

The film suggests at every turn that a man’s pursuit of fame is an endeavor so worthy that any and all subjugation of women is an acceptable, sometimes necessary, condition. Not only does it establish the acceptability of subjugation in the masculine quest for fame, it suggests that victimized women should be pleased with their own subjugation because it aids those that victimize them in the pursuit of fame. The film repeatedly invokes the phrase “by any means possible” to suggest the paramount importance of Djay’s quest. He is told on multiple occasions that he must spread his message “by any means possible.” What is unfortunate is that that maxim is taken to heart quite fully, and the burden is laid literally on the backs and bodies of women, whether prostitutes or wives.

**Managing Tensions**

*Hustle & Flow* subscribes so wholeheartedly to Djay’s quest that it ends up necessitating and justifying the subordination of all of his associates to his goals. Subordination is made necessary because the film is a fame-seeking story and an enactment of the American Dream. *Hustle & Flow* must prioritize the positioning of its protagonist as a worthy and heroic individual, subordinate it’s supporting characters and yet recognize their contributions while
preserving the likeability of its protagonist. The film ultimately resolved this dilemma by resisting the “individualistic variant” of the American Dream’s pressure to place people in the category of either hero or failure (Rowlands & Jones, 2011, p. 133) and introducing a third category, the hero’s helper. This category maintains both the fame-seeker’s heroic individual status and likeability.

Celebrity categorically relies on a figurehead system. The celebrity figure is inherently the figurehead of a substantial amount of collective action because they do not come into existence without sizable aid. Far from being self-made, celebrities tend to have “many producers” (Gamson, 2006, p. 703) and rely on the assistance of many figures to fashion a commodity out of their “raw material” (Dyer, 2007, p. 86). The idolization of the celebrity figureheads of collective action remains firmly in place despite the increased public awareness of how much the star is manufactured before being released for public consumption (Gamson, 2007, p. 152-153).

Regardless of how much a given celebrity relies on collective effort and manufacture, they maintain their idol status. It is the acquisition of such status that lends dramatic heft to tales of fame-seeking. In light of this, it is likely that any film about the quest for fame will feel the pressure to establish its main character in a manner that preserves their status as the adored figure lest the character be rendered dramatically inert. The goal of adoration is complicated by the reality that celebrity creation is a process that involves the actions of many. Tales of fame-seeking must find a way to communicate the necessary subordination of those assistants in a manner which avoids conflict and preserves both the likeability of its hero and the audience’s capacity to root for the aspiring celebrity. Hustle & Flow finds itself at just such an impasse. On one hand, the subordination of those who aid Djay is necessary so he may emerge from the story
as the clear hero, a visionary and worthy individual. His status as an active producer cannot be compromised. Too much reliance on artifice and behind the scenes manufacturing would undermine this positioning. On the other hand, *Hustle & Flow* is not attempting a subversion of “star-is-born” tales in the vein of films like *Showgirls* (Henderson, 2004, para. 2). By offering a straightforward, non-subversive narrative of fame-seeking, the film amplifies the likeability of its protagonist. This likeability would be compromised were he placed into conflict with those who have contributed to his success over the allotment of the status and success that results from their collective efforts.

The judgment of the film’s creators in regards to what constitutes likeability may be radically skewed, but it is evident that establishing Djay’s likeability is a priority in this narrative. One of the film’s producers, Stephanie Allain, overtly refers to Djay as the film’s hero. She explicitly reveals that his likeability is important when she discusses the scene wherein Djay violently expels Lexus from his house. She reveals that the scene was hotly debated and almost toned down for fear that audiences might turn on Djay were he portrayed too cruelly (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006a). The scene was, in the end, not downplayed, but the interview nonetheless reveals that the film intends for its audience to like its protagonist, confirming the centrality of Djay’s likeability to the film’s goals.

The film does not have the option of allowing Djay to treat the other characters in the same manner as he treated Lexus. Lexus is never endeared to the audience because, as Allain highlights, Lexus never believed in Djay or his pursuit (Khammar, Barbour, & Zubieta, 2006a). She is an outlier. The film’s other characters all support Djay and are portrayed sympathetically, whereas she is scapegoated. The subordination of the sympathetic characters, however, must still transpire so Djay can acquire hero status. The film enables subordination by having the
supporting characters embrace their subordination, thus leaving the protagonist’s likeability intact. The film tells a tale of the American Dream which requires the presence of both the heroic individual and the collective action required for his success (Smith, 2009, p. 224).

*Hustle & Flow* positions masculine fame-seeking as standing apart from the feminine pursuit of fame as a means of remedying a culturally instilled lack (Couldry, 2012, p. 93). Motivations for masculine fame are distinct from motivations that define the quest for feminine fame. Until this point, I have primarily emphasized Djay’s desire to prove himself a worthy and talented individual. This motivation is complemented by a desire for fame as a means of upward mobility. The desire for a better life establishes the film as an American Dream narrative.

Djay’s dream of upward mobility is laid out by the film during an early conversation he has with Shug. When the conversation happens we are already attuned to the paltry conditions of Djay’s life; neither his house nor car suggests any sort of affluence. All of his time is spent hustling women and drugs yet he is still struggling to pay bills. His conversation with Shug reveals the extent to which the conditions of his life have begun to wear him down. He reveals anxiety stemming from the fact that his father died at the same age he presently is, and a fear that life has nothing better to offer him.

Djay’s choice to pursue fame and remedy his social positioning represents a response to something of a vicissitude in his life. As Michael Carrithers (2012) discusses, a vicissitude is a difficulty or hardship “erupting into a life, a career, a course of action or an ordered scene” (p. 2-3). In this instance, it is not so much that something external has erupted into Djay’s life, but rather that a realization has pushed him into a crisis which disrupts the already tenuous flow of his life; the difficulty or hardship has erupted from his own mind. He has perhaps kept his
anxiety and fear at bay for a time, but it is at this moment that they have moved to the forefront of his consciousness and been corralled into a vicissitude.

To navigate vicissitudes, Carrithers claims, people call upon culture and rhetoric. The former is defined in this schema “as a set of potentials and possibilities…a set of tools” (p. 3) which may be put to use to bring about a number of outcomes. It is the actual use of the metaphorical tools of culture to bring about a particular outcome that is the definition of rhetoric in Carrithers’s vocabulary. The film introduces Djay’s toolkit for managing his crisis in the form of Skinny Black, a character that provides a glimpse “into what the American Dream looks like when realized” (Sternheimer, 2011, p. 3). The film offers Black as a template. As a celebrity, he is a “marketable symbol” of the American Dream, embodying the notion that “anyone, regardless of background” can make a better life (Smith, 2009, p. 223-224). The fact that Black and Djay both come from Memphis and share similar backgrounds foregrounds the distinct sense of possibility Djay has that he may follow in Black’s footsteps.

As both a tale of fame-seeking and an enactment of the American Dream, Hustle & Flow is presented with the sizable task of negotiating inherent tensions between valuing the individual and the collective. It must do so in a manner which simultaneously affirms the collective and lets its protagonist emerge as an active producer, whose fame is founded on a respectable discrete performative act that affirms his talent. This same tension has been addressed by Smith (2009) in his analysis of celebrity biopics Walk the Line and Ray. Smith found that this tension was managed in the films by introducing heterosexual romantic love as a catalyst for the hero’s redemption (p. 224). This formulation, unfortunately, is not of much use for this film because Djay is not portrayed as requiring redemption: his actions are supported by his film. Furthermore, while heterosexual romantic love is introduced by the film, it is not presented as
the driving force in Djay’s accomplishment of his goals. It is a third-act revelation that has little
time to fully take hold. The two characters only appear together on-screen once more after they
fall in love, and their co-appearance transpires in a scene which does not give them the
opportunity to interact.

The film is required to find another way to manage the tensions inherent in its genre, a
task made difficult by the necessity of honoring Djay as a heroic individual dependent on his
own skill and vision without falling prey to the tendency of “individualistic variant” of the
American Dream to categorize people as either heroes or failures (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 133). Djay’s supporting cast cannot be heroes because he is the singular hero of a film which
affirms the masculine celebrity’s position as a respectable, discrete-performative-act-wielding
figure. The film cannot have him share glory because that compromises his status as a visionary
hero. At the same time, the film’s remaining characters cannot be failures because they have
made important contributions and their demotion to failures would compromise the audience’s
ability to root for Djay. The film accomplishes this tricky task by clinging to an “individualistic
variant” of the American Dream that complicates the division of people into the categories of
hero or failure (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 133). It introduces a third category: the hero’s
helpers.

The film puts forth hero’s helper as a worthy position. The hero’s helpers are largely
confident in their own importance and show no desire to displace Djay as the figurehead of their
collective effort. If any one of Djay’s associates wished to wield more influence over his vision,
or clamor for recognition alongside him, conflict would arise and likely nullify either Djay’s
status as a heroic, worthy individual or his likeability. No such conflict can exist if Djay is the
only character to possess the desire for recognition and his vision and talent are portrayed as
being worthy enough to warrant the depicted submission. Each character that supports Djay in the film is portrayed as content with their role in his quest. Key and Shelby respond excitedly to hearing Djay’s song on the radio, proud that they helped make it. Nola is equally excited because she contributed to Djay’s success by sleeping with a disc jockey in order to procure radio play for Djay’s song. Finally, Shug is portrayed as the most excited of them all, ecstatically singing her lover’s abusive song to her newborn. Their happiness is depicted as aligned with their ability to aid Djay, who is unimpeded in claiming a masculine, respectable fame. The film may posit, through Shelby, that “every man has the right, the goddamn right, to contribute a verse,” but ultimately it allows Djay to be its only character who enacts that right.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I interrogated the film *Hustle & Flow* with the intent of extracting some of the guiding principles of masculine fame. The film structures masculine fame as possessing a preoccupation with respectability that requires those seeking it to possess discrete performative acts. The emphasis on respectability and proving oneself are key to the pursuit of masculine fame, an endeavor that requires the proof of charisma in a meritocratic system. The deployment of discrete performative acts that produce high quality, enduring works external to their creator is crucial in establishing one’s charisma in a system that offers different opportunities and subject positions for women and men.

I have discussed the ways in which the structuring of masculine fame’s pursuit as an endeavor of very high respectability functions in the film to allow for the subjugation of the fame-seeker’s associates, which is enacted along gendered lines. The men in Djay’s life were subordinate to him, but they maintained their status as producers and they are presented as having a largely collaborative relationship with Djay. The film’s women, by contrast, are deeply
subordinated to Djay and reduced to embodied spectacle sold to fund Djay’s enterprise. This reduction is in line with contemporary practices which reduce the status of women from all corners of culture to spectacle.

Finally, this chapter argued that the need to position the protagonist as a heroic, worthy individual, prevalent in films that depict fame-seeking and enactments of the American Dream, is in competition with two other needs. The first of these is the need to preserve the protagonist’s likeability and status, and the second is the need to honor the collective enterprise behind his emergence. The film manages this difficulty by introducing a third category, the hero’s helpers, to disrupt the “individualistic variant” of the American Dream which fosters the division of people into the categories of hero and loser (Rowlands & Jones, 2011, p. 133).
Chapter 4: Concluding Arguments and Future Directions

The work of this project has been to interrogate filmic representations of fame-seeking in the 21st century in order to establish the features that define contemporary fame along gendered lines. As this project concludes I will offer a brief overview of the preceding work, followed by a consideration of the ways in which the insights gleaned about the constructions of masculine and feminine fame may be read as responses to different, contested, democratizations of fame. This final chapter concludes by looking ahead and putting forth potential areas for further exploration of the various ways that contemporary fame is structured along the lines of other identity markers.

Review

In the first chapter I worked to establish, first, the centrality of fame to contemporary culture. There has been a noted “colonization…of everyday life in contemporary western societies” by celebrity (Turner, 2006, p. 153) that has established a fame culture wherein fame has come to be positioned as something one lacks and thus feels compelled to attain (Couldry, 2012, p. 93). Against such a backdrop, there has been a noted increase in the desire and perceived availability of fame (Brim, 2009, p. 1; J. Gountas, S. Gountas, Reeves & Moran, 2012, p. 680; Turner, 2006, p. 156). Importantly, as the frequency and perceived viability of fame-seeking has increased there has been a distinct shift in the content of fame. I identified two particularly potent examples of this in the form of the celebutantes and the reality television stars. The former have acquired their fame by displaying “the minutiae of…public life” and offering themselves up as “tourist sight[s]” for public consumption (Hillyer, 2010, p. 20). The latter have risen to prominence by bringing “the spectacle of ‘everyday life’” (Turner, 2004, p. 85) to the forefront of entertainment. I argued that the emergence of these figures set forth new
templates for fame that have thus far been enduring and that the early 21st century thus saw what I have labeled a performative turn in fame.

The proposed performative turn in fame was further argued as an outgrowth of a progressively increasing tendency throughout the prior century. Throughout the 20th century there was a consistent push on the part of both the media and the general public to focus greater attention on the “private lives, personal habits, tastes, and romances” (Gamson, 2007, p. 146) of the famous. I established a vocabulary for discussing this trend, explaining that it was the discrete performative act that was increasingly being pushed aside in favor of more general stylized performances of life. This trend increased throughout the century, culminating in the 1990s “arrival of the mass market for celebrity gossip” (Turner, 2004, p. 89) which, as I argued, gave way to the performative turn in the years shortly thereafter.

I further argued in chapter one that the relevance of such a turn was particularly strong for women. It has been primarily women who have been subject to the process of being made spectacle (Edwards, 2013, p.156). Their “mass media exposure” has been typically concerned with the ways in which they manage and modify their bodies and appearances (van Zoonen, 2006, p. 291-292) as well as their “private life and leisure activity” (Geraghty, 2007, p. 106). The women whose fame has constituted the performative turn have preempted the reduction to spectacle by offering themselves up as such from the outset.

Limited conceptions of talent have ignored the contextually situated nature of talent itself (Barab & Plucker, 2010, p. 174) and resulted in the derision of those who have been labeled “faux celebrities” (Kellner, 2009, p. 716) who lack “merit” (Ferri, 2010, p. 408), or “any obvious talent” (Biressi & Nunn, 2005, p. 145) despite their masterful utilization of “televisual skills” (Boyle & Kelley, 2010, p. 336) in a highly mediatized society. Unfortunately, their fame has thus
had the effect of strengthening a divide between feminine and masculine forms of fame. The former has come to largely be considered spectacle while the latter continues to enjoy a reputation of consisting of “serious stars with careers” (Edwards, 2013, p. 156). It is this distinction with which the subsequent chapters have been concerned.

Chapter 2

The second chapter was an interrogation of Sofia Coppola’s *The Bling Ring* with the goals of explicating some of the characteristics that define feminine fame in the 21st century. The tale of a group of teenagers robbing the homes of various Hollywood celebrities yielded multiple insights. First, the film structures feminine fame as heavily influenced by the fame culture discussed by Nick Couldry (2012) as well as the performative nature of contemporary feminine fame. The film’s protagonists are shown to be stirred by their idols fashion choices and lives, their stylized performances of life, rather than by any discrete performative acts.

This fascination is evident through the characters’ chosen means of pursuing fame. Rather than honing any sort of particular craft or skill that might constitute for them a discrete performative act, they focus their energies on crafting particular stylized performances of their lives. Their consumption of fame engendered in them an “immanent process of self-evaluation” and became useful in the development of their “own masquerade[s]” (Wilson, 2010, p. 35) built around offering their lives up as spectacle.

Social media was depicted as a major tool in the bling ring’s self-commodification. Following the lead of established celebrities, social media functioned for them as a stage on which their performances were able to transpire. Online settings allowed them to stage the self “as both character and performance” in “ritual performance[s]” that are at all times “highly conscious” of the potential to be seen (Marshall, 2010, p. 40). Also crucial to their
spectacularization, as well as their fixation with celebrities, was the role of material objects, the technologies of glamour. The physical locations of celebrity homes allowed the characters to feel “presence” with that which they consider to be of utmost importance (Pezzullo, 2007, p. 9) and brand name luxury items made real for them “the pull of the future” (Thrift, 2008, p. 31) on which an experience economy is built (Thrift, 2008, p. 71).

The emphasis on self-commodification that resulted in the submission to very particular standards of beauty reflects both neoliberal and postfeminist thought. In response to the reduction of “all possible forms of sociality” to “market exchanges” (Urciuoli, 2008, p. 212) the bling ring became “active agents in their self-commodification” (Gammon, 2012, p. 515). As feminine and feminized actors, the bling ring’s self-commodification revealed the influence of postfeminist discourses that demand “self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline” (Gill, 2008, p. 441) in the all-important quest that fulfill the expectations of traditional beauty standards enforced by an internalized “male judging gaze” (Gill, 2007b, p. 151).

Seeking feminine fame was further depicted in the film as a quest that entails significant danger. The characters are shown to face severe legal consequences for their fame-seeking lifestyle, including one character receiving a DUI and multiple others being convicted for robbery. Despite this, the desire for fame is never shown to appreciably dissipate. Indeed, there is an intensity to the quest for fame that seeks to transform even dangerous, tragic events into publicity. In this way the quest for feminine fame is posited as a relationship of cruel optimism as put forth by Lauren Berlant (2011) wherein the desired fame of the bling ring becomes “an obstacle to [their] flourishing” (p. 1) rather than a source of fulfillment.

*The Bling Ring* finally structured feminine fame through key absences. The film’s characters have a distinct lack of interest in anything but fame, as well as a lack of interest in
achieving fame rooted in anything other than spectacle. Fame itself is presented as a categorical obsession in feminine fame. In line with the general stance from both academics and members of the popular press, feminine fame is finally portrayed as, resulting from this disposition, lacking the respect accorded to more masculine fame derived from discrete performative acts.

Chapter 3

The manner in which The Bling Ring constructs feminine fame stands in sharp contrast to the vision of masculine fame that emerges in Craig Brewer’s Hustle & Flow. In chapter three I demonstrated that while The Bling Ring posited its protagonists’ pursuit of fame as emerging from the desire to fulfill a culturally instilled lack of fame (Couldry, 2012, p. 93), Hustle & Flow depicted the quest as being spurred by far less generalized conditions. The film’s protagonist was presented as possessing very specific motivations for seeking fame. He was first portrayed as doing so in order to improve the material conditions of his life. As a rundown pimp with limited prospects he was seeking to acquire fame as a remedy and emerge as a celebrity, a “marketable symbol” of the American Dream (Smith, 2009, p. 223) that demonstrates “what the American Dream looks like when realized” (Sternheimer, 2011, p. 3).

However, the mere improvement of his life was argued to be a less than sufficient outcome of the pursuit of fame. The film was shown to temper the goal of social advancement with the goal of doing so through means which provide a fame that is derived from the recognition of skill in regards to a discrete performative act. Masculine fame is “predicated upon a defensive assertion of activity” which resists the acquisition of fame based on ability to function as spectacle (Edwards, 2013, p. 158). The gradual move away from the centrality of discrete performative acts has prompted the charge of many cultural critics that fame has been cheapened (Bell, 2010, p. 1). Masculine fame is portrayed as awarded on the basis of
respectability and what is culturally constructed as talent. It is thus presented as a fundamentally charismatic endeavor because those who undertake it strive to acquire a social position based on their proof of “strength in life” (Weber, 2006b, p. 58).

A charismatic system is one that is meritocratic because the end goal is the reception of status in exchange for the demonstration of merit. Those who seek feminine fame may receive their desired status, but it will not be through any culturally recognized meritorious acts that it is earned. Masculine fame is, by contrast, framed as a deeply charismatic system. The fame its protagonist seeks will be derived from the music he makes, which both demonstrates his artistic vision and does the important work of representing the “collective history, beliefs and knowledge systems” (Mans, 2007, p. 248) of his culture.

The masculine celebrity is shown to be an active producer of external commodities which reflect talent and do important cultural work. This stands opposed to the feminine celebrity, whose produced commodities are iterations of their publicized selves and lives. Feminine celebrities are deeply concerned with their presentations of self because their appearances and personal lives comprise the spectacle which affords them their status. Masculine celebrities are not trading on spectacle and thus their personal lives and self-presentation are depicted by *Hustle & Flow* as relevant only to the degree to which they corroborate the messages of the produced art or increase the chances that it may reach a larger audience.

There exists a cultural logic wherein the adulation of the individual celebrity is perpetuated and their greatness affirmed despite both the considerable amount of collective action upon which they rely (Dyer, 2007, p. 86) and the public’s increased knowledge of this reliance (Gamson, 2007, p. 152-153). I demonstrated that *Hustle & Flow* is a film which proceeds under the rubric of this logic. It presents the vision of its protagonist as being of such
paramount importance and value that he is positioned as deserving glory and recognition despite his evident reliance on the collective efforts and actions of his associates to bring his vision to realization. As a tale of the American Dream it thus clings to the individualistic variant within it which emphasizes an individual’s “extraordinary heroism” (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 133). The film’s decision to position its protagonist as a singular hero necessitates the subordination of its remaining characters. Despite their evident importance, they cannot emerge as heroes because only one such position has been reserved: the celebrity.

I argued, however, that the subordination of the remaining characters could not, however, be totalizing to the degree that the individualistic variant of the American Dream demands. They have been endeared to the audience and made inarguably important contributions to the hero’s success and thus while they cannot be heroes themselves, neither can they be losers (Rowland & Jones, 2011, p. 133). I argued that to manage this, the film establishes a third category which disrupts the hero/loser dichotomy: the hero’s helper. The hero’s helpers, as put forth the film, are figures who aid the hero on his quest while remaining subordinate to his vision and displaying no desire to share in the spoils of glory that result from his success. The hero, despite receiving the glory and adulation for an action that was committed collectively, is thus preserved as a likeable figure because there is no conflict over status allotment. In addition to the presentation of the hero’s helpers as taking no issue with their position, I argued that their subordination is further made palatable by a framing of their relationships with the hero as familial. Not only is he a visionary that they see fit to aid without widespread recognition, he is also a friend, confidant, and provider.

The positioning of the protagonist as not only a worthy visionary but a familial figure is of particular importance to his subjugation of the film’s women. I argued that the subordination
depicted in the film transpires along gendered lines. While the men are subordinate to his vision, they are allowed to remain active producers. Through their skill and expertise they are able to assist the protagonist in actualizing a vision that nonetheless remains resolutely his. By contrast, the women are depicted as aiding him by strictly adhering to his directives. They are reduced to embodied spectacle and prostituted to fund the protagonist’s quest. Their subordination is all-encompassing and it is thus crucial that the film portray their subjugator as someone who provides for them and affirms their importance in his operation.

The film’s reduction of women to embodied spectacle was argued to mirror larger cultural practices. A relative monopoly on respectability is enjoyed by famous men and is enabled by the reduction of famous women to spectacle (Edwards, 2013, p. 156) by focusing the attention given to them on their appearances (van Zoonen, 2006, p. 291-292) and private lives (Geraghty, 2007, p. 106). Men in general are permitted to focus less on their self-presentations (Davis, 2006, p. 559) while women are consigned to being valued primarily for their “decorative…power” (Douglas, 2010, p. 5). The protagonist of *Hustle & Flow* depends on the power of the male gaze (Gill, 2007b, p.152) to make objects out of the women he sells even as he, as men are prone to do, averts objectifying gazes and emphasizes his status as an active doer (Dyer, 1982, p. 66-67).

**Gendered Fames and Democratization**

The crucial difference between masculine and feminine fame as constructed in these films lies in the differing conceptions of the value of fame. *The Bling Ring* deals with characters who conceive of fame as possessing inherent value. It is categorically worth possessing because in our contemporary culture of fame it has been constructed as a lack (Couldry, 2012, p. 93). The positing of inherent value is what justifies the pursuit of fame through the employment of
stylized life performances; it is not particularly important that the achieved fame be respected so long as it is achieved. *Hustle & Flow* posits no such inherent value in being well-known. Fame is instead portrayed as possessing instrumental value; it is through fame that its protagonist may acquire a better life and come to be recognized as a worthy individual. Discrete performative acts are employed in the quest for masculine fame because respectability is what makes being famous worthwhile.

My concluding argument is that these alternate conceptions of celebrity’s value reveal that they are tied closely to different waves of what has been referred to as fame’s democratization. Masculine fame may be thought of as derived from one wave of democratization because it perpetuates the notion that it is “the personal possession of any worthy individual” (Gamson, 2007, p. 143). Such a conception invokes a meritocracy and stands apart from a later, more contested, democratization that transpired in a society where “systems of celebrity” have come to guide our actions in a multitude of contexts (Williams, 2006, p. 376) and fame has been constructed as “almost a birth-right” (Bell, 2010, p. 67). I will argue that despite their appearance of being responses to different waves of fame’s democratization, both masculine and feminine fame reveal both democratic and aristocratic influences and are largely similar.

**Masculine Fame and Democratization**

Throughout this project I have emphasized the divide between fame derived from discrete performative acts and fame derived from stylized performances of life. Early forms of celebrity, dating before the 17th century, relied heavily on the latter of these two means to fame. The 20th century saw the framing of celebrities’ monetary success as a reward reaped because of their hard work and talent (Sternheimer, 2011, p.200). However, there was a time when wealth was
not derived from fame but instead was necessary to achieve fame in the first place. To be a celebrity it was crucial to have the resources to allow for control over how, and by whom, one was seen. Thus, prior to the 17th century, fame consisted of carefully manipulated public images and was thus firmly aristocratic because it was the aristocracy who possessed the resources necessary for such control (Gamson, 2007, p. 142).

The shift towards a more democratic conception of fame began in the late 16th century when various technologies and arts, like printing and portraiture, became increasingly accessible to more members of society. Resultant from this was the gradual detachment of fame “from an aristocratic social status” and a subsequent reframing of fame as “the personal possession of any worthy individual” (Gamson, 2007, p. 143). Claims to fame were able to be made on the basis of artistry and achievement because the “aristocracy’s virtual monopoly on fame” had fallen apart (Braudy, 1986, p. 387). Further democratizations of fame have been claimed, but it is this first democratization to which Hustle & Flow responds.

Chapter three clearly articulates the ways in which Hustle & Flow frame’s its protagonist’s quest as one which he undertakes both because he is a worthy individual and because he seeks to prove as much. Thus minimal explication of the ties between the film’s construction of masculine fame and this wave of fame’s democratization is required at this juncture. What is important to note is that the first movement that might be described as a democratization of fame transpired in the 17th century. This movement rendered fame something that was able to be possessed because of merit and Hustle & Flow, by so strongly emphasizing merit, constructs masculine fame as a response to this process. It is also important to note that by clinging so tenaciously to the notion that celebrity is gained by those who are worthy the film constructs masculine fame in a manner which disingenuously downplays the very real role
played by aristocratic systems. While the 17th century shift has indeed made fame more
democratic, the transition has not been totalizing and material resources and social status still
play a considerable role in who may come to possess fame. Thus masculine fame is best thought
of as incorporating both the democratic and aristocratic conceptions of fame that remain engaged

**Feminine Fame and Democratization**

A second movement that can be tenuously described as a further democratization of fame
transpired across the closing stretches of the 20th century and the opening stretches of the 21st. It
is this second democratization to which feminine fame as constructed by *The Bling Ring*
responds to. The driving force of this proposed second democratization of fame is reality
television. In chapter one I detailed the ways in which reality television makes celebrities out of
“ordinary people” (Turner, 2006, p. 155) and it is this propensity to give platform to the ordinary
that has allowed it to be claimed by some as a democratizing force. Fame and media scholar Su
Holmes (2004) notes that some critics have hailed it as a bold release of ordinary people into the
public eye (p. 112).

Such a characterization, however, is largely contested by many scholars. Media scholar
Mark Andrejevic (2002) for instance notes that much reality programming serves to naturalize
surveillance and acclimate audiences to an environment defined by “increasingly unequal access
to…information” (p. 267). The democratization of celebrity through reality television has been
argued to be a “fantasy” (Collins, 2008, p. 101) which downplays the very real issues of media
access (Holmes, 2004, p. 112). Turner (2006) goes as far as to suggest that the democratization
of fame is inconceivable because as long as media industries “remain in control of the symbolic
economy” celebrity will remain “systematically hierarchical” (p. 157). He further argues that
while demographic patterns of media access may broaden, such a development cannot be read as a move towards more “democratic politics” (p. 158). Nick Couldry (2012) echoes these claims, observing that despite the internet’s “many platforms for do-it-yourself celebrity” there has been no challenge to celebrity’s “broader hierarchies” (p. 83).

As an alternative to conceiving of the move towards increased media representation of ordinary people as the democratizing of fame, Turner (2004) suggests the concept of the demotic turn which seeks to give representation to many iterations of the ordinary for their own sake while leaving the hierarchical structures of fame that render it undemocratic intact (p. 83). While this alternative conception appears largely accurate, it is still quite true that reality programming “implicitly promises” democratization to its audience (Andrejevic, 2002, p. 267).

It is surely not coincidental that fame “is no longer perceived to be beyond the reach of the ordinary person” (Gountas et al., 2012, p. 680) at the same moment that this implicit promise of democratization is being made by the very programming which fetishizes the ordinary. This is the backdrop against which feminine fame is framed by The Bling Ring. It is responding to a highly contested second democratization of fame that has made fame seem even more achievable than the first. The first democratization of fame removed, to an extent, the necessity of material resources for the acquisition of fame. What the second has done is remove yet another barrier: the necessity of talent.

While I have argued in this project that the construction of feminine fame based on spectacle as an endeavor that does not require talent is misguided, it nonetheless remains a governing cultural logic. Furthermore, the protagonists of The Bling Ring do not seem to push against this construction. While their pursuit may require a particular level of skill they are not
shown to explicitly recognize this and thus implicitly endorse, or at least allow for, the notion that they are less than talented.

It thus appears fair to suggest that *The Bling Ring* positions the pursuit of feminine fame as a pursuit that is perceived by those who undertake it as utterly democratic; it requires neither status nor talent, it is “almost a birth-right” (Bell, 2010, p. 67) and the propensity to acquire it is made even stronger by its cultural construction as a lack (Couldry, 2012, p.93). The pursuit of feminine fame, however, comes to an impasse because the mere consideration of population size ensures that not everyone can become famous (Couldry, 2012, p. 96). Given this constraint it becomes clear that the ability to achieve celebrity status is indeed governed.

Luck is virtually the only option available to be assigned as the arbiter of who receives fame in a scenario where it has been denied that talent and status are mitigating factors. Given such a position’s lack of viability it is obvious that the construction of feminine fame as representing a new wave in fame’s democratization is fundamentally misguided. It is likely that many people have dreamed of acquiring this fame only to be faced with the harsh reality that, in fact, both talent and resources matter.

While reality television may fetishize the ordinary, and while it may have given platform to many ordinary figures, it cannot be said to be a space where the actual ordinary may be witnessed. Given that television personalities are “always in some sense ‘acting’” (Lury, 1995, p. 117) it is evident that the ordinary is not being portrayed so much as performed. People on reality programs strive to offer “what appear to be spontaneously amusing or comedic performances”, and present “likeable…marketable selves” (Bennett & Holmes, 2010, p. 76). The successful completion of these tasks requires “televisual skills” (Boyle & Kelley, 2010, p. 336).
In addition to the necessity of talent, the status and resources wielded by the fame-seeker are revealed to matter as well. In many instances, like *The Hills* and *The Simple Life* to name but two examples, the people who are given the opportunities to headline reality programming are wealthy. They thus have the capacity to perform iterations of the ordinary that will be appealing to a public that is interested in the lives of the wealthy (Kendall, 2011, p. 17). Furthermore, even those who may come to garner media presence despite a lack of wealth and status may fall victim to an unsavory presentation of their identity because they do not have the means to control how they are portrayed. Though many celebrities wield enough status to influence, if not fully determine, how they are portrayed by the media (Gamson, 2006, p. 703), the same cannot be said for those who find themselves on reality television. Many who join reality television programming find themselves confronted with the “profoundly ‘asymmetric’…nature of the media process that was previously masked from them” (Couldry, 2012, p. 94).

While feminine fame rooted in spectacle may be dangled in front of those who desire celebrity as a means to acquire it that is profoundly democratic, requiring neither special ability nor abundant resources. However, this framing is in the end patently deceptive. It is on some level democratic because, like masculine fame, it is an endeavor in which talent plays an important role. This is, however, not the level on which it is portrayed as democratic because the implicit promises of reality television push audiences to conclude that their mere ordinariness is a sufficient condition for fame. The messages surrounding feminine fame do not claim that it may be possessed by worthy individuals, but that it may be possessed by anybody at all. The misguided framing of the quest for feminine fame as democratic also obscures the aristocratic tendency of feminine fame to be frequently allotted, or allotted in a pleasing manner, to those with abundant resources.
The quest for fame emerges as a quest that is often embarked upon under false pretenses. Both feminine and masculine fame have been shown here to have more in common with each other than has previously been suggested by larger cultural discourses. Neither of them may rely fully on either talent or status. They are each influenced by both aristocratic and democratic notions of fame. The true point of departure between them is that masculine fame is framed by cultural discourses as a democratic system that honors talent while feminine fame is presented as a democratic system wherein fame is bestowed on some in exchange for their willingness to become disreputable spectacle.

**Future Directions**

In discussing future directions in studying the ways in which fame is constructed in contemporary society it is important that I first acknowledge one aspect of this project. Chapter three deals with the film *Hustle & Flow* and does so primarily in a way that addresses its gendered aspects. It is, however, a film about predominately black characters and deals with hip-hop culture. These aspects were not engaged for two reasons. First, my analysis primarily concerns gender and thus it was the film’s treatment of masculinity and femininity that I sought to attend to. Second, and more intriguingly, the issues were difficult to engage because of a startling lack of scholarship concerning the ways in which celebrity is organized along racial fault lines. It is this second consideration that points towards what I consider to be particularly promising future directions for the study of celebrity.

To be clear, there does exist interesting scholarship that does the work of articulating how predominately black hip-hop artists utilize their celebrity status. Smith (2003), for instance, deals with the ways in which hip-hop moguls employ their celebrity to push their audiences towards embracing the “emerging paradigm of accessible luxury and social status” (p. 71). African
American studies scholar Imani Perry (2004) has noted that the desire for and boasting about wealth accumulation in some strands of hip-hop music can be viewed as an act of resistance against “American economic and social inequalities” that normally bar the typically black practitioners of hip-hop from significant achievement (p. 49). Dreams of upward mobility are quite prevalent in certain incarnations of hip-hop and rap music. Journalist, activist, and self-proclaimed member of the hip-hop generation Bakari Kitwana (2002) argues that members of this generation value the accumulation of wealth more “than most anything else” (p. 6).

Work like this takes place at the intersection of academic interest in race and celebrity and interestingly articulates the motivations of some black celebrities for seeking fame as well as their uses of celebrity. What would nicely complement this work is further scholarship that takes place at the same intersection, but begins with considerations of celebrity; instead of asking only how it is that people of different races use celebrity, or why they desire it, we might also inquire as to how the ways in which celebrity is structured and distributed along racial lines compels different performances of fame and/or fame-seeking. Scholarship that falls under the umbrella of celebrity studies is strangely silent on these issues and the opportunity to amend this silence beckons. To do so we might follow the lead of Watkins (2005), who discusses the ways in which many mainstream hip-hop performers have immersed themselves “into a world of urban villainy” in order to maintain their celebrity and wealth (p. 2-3). This fascinating observation is used by its author to explore its impact on hip-hop and black culture, but it might also be used to draw conclusions regarding the ways in which fame is constructed to mean and require different things for different identities.

It is not merely race, however, that celebrity studies scholarship is oddly mute about. The area of study in general is not presently occupied with much substantial consideration of the
relationships between fame and various identity markers. Gender has been addressed more than other subject positions in celebrity studies but despite this, as Edwards (2013) notes, the work which does so has been largely infrequent and in some ways inadequate, presenting only “a rather partial picture” of the ways in which both the production and consumption of celebrity are gendered (p. 166). This project has sought to further that work and more thoroughly address the ways in which different types of fame are made available to those who desire it based on their gender. Similar work calls to be done in regards to race, class, sexuality, religion, and any and all other considerations that comprise subject positionality.
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