

# The Naked Eye

## The Fame Game

BY MARK MATOUSEK

*What is the real hunger  
that hides behind  
the desire to be famous?*

Shortly after *Saturday Night Fever* made John Travolta a household name, I was sitting in an airport restaurant with him and my lover Bob (his manager), trying to eat microwaved bagels and waiting for our flight to be announced. Trying, I say, because it was hard not to gag with a line of autograph hounds stretched from Travolta's chair out the restaurant door. Giggling, gawking, pointing, the fans waited impatiently for the movie star to sign something—to prove they'd really been close enough to touch the cleft in his unshaven chin, to fathom the celluloid blue of his eyes, to check out his disco-butt squeezed into an orange plastic chair.

John was gracious as usual, letting his bagel get cold. As stranger after stranger thrust paper at him and beamed, he accommodated them while we (The Entourage) did our best to behave normally in fame's reflected glare. When a half hour had passed with no end of the intrusion in sight, however, Bob decided to step in. "Thank you for coming," he said, dispersing the line with a wave of his hands. Most of the people turned away, disappointed but stoical. One woman, though, would not be dismissed. She lingered with two children at her side; finally, from the corner of my eye, I saw her marching toward our table. For a moment, she ogled Travolta, her face determined, almost angry. Then she said, *ad alta voce*, "You sure look better on TV!"

This was far from the meanest thing I'd heard disgruntled fans say to celebrities in our travels. In fact, I had often been shocked by the unexpected rudeness of civilians toward famous people in the flesh. These assaults struck me as not only tacky

but also ontologically weird. It was as if, when one-dimensional images stepped off the screen into three-dimensional space, two realities clashed, leaving gaps in the viewer's perception. Such gaps made normal considerations—the chance that the famous person might have feelings, for example, or prefer to wait alone for his turn at the toilet—seem un-



necessary. I became convinced that fame, however fascinating, was a truly creepy phenomenon, alienating at its best.

This impression intensified later on when I worked as an editor at Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. In his obsession with glamour and image, the Father of Pop had single-handedly taken the manufacture and exploitation of fame to whole new

depths of shallowness. Every month, I watched previously unknown faces have their 15 minutes of fame, flicker across the public eye, then fade away like mayflies when the next issue hit the stands. It was impossible not to be struck by the pathos of this, the planned obsolescence built into the media machine, or by the broken promise of glory that fame held out and then withdrew. Depressed by my years as a Warhol lackey, I was quite sure that fame was nothing that I wanted. Besides, I was a writer, not a rock star. It wasn't as if teenage girls threw their panties at William Styron when he walked down the street. (Or if they did, I'm sure he threw them back.) I would be immune to that temptation.

How wrong I was. Recently, doing publicity for my first book, I've been surprised by how insidious the hunger for fame can be, lurking under a mask of ambivalence. Despite the vow I made to remember how empty fame really is and to keep my ego at arm's length, I must admit that as the spotlight circles my life, a hunger I didn't think I had (and which I find completely embarrassing) has woken up against my will. Though I tell myself it's only natural to want some attention after many years of struggle, and that having my pride stroked a little is no heinous crime, another side of me is troubled. I'm learning that there's an awfully fine line between promoting one's work and promoting oneself, and that humility is hard to hold when they're treating you like a celebrity. How can you *not* be preoccupied with self-image (especially if you're as vain as I am) when you're posing for *Esquire* and thousands of strangers are

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Illustration by Ron Flemmings

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likely to see the picture? There's no sense pretending to be detached when you're not—besides, you want your book to sell, you want your publisher to be happy, you want to enjoy your moment. But how to ignore the part of you that's lapping up the cream a bit too greedily, shouting inwardly, "Look at me!"

Swept up by the illusion of fame, you try to forget that it ruins people, particularly those in the spiritual field. You forget how many celebrity dharma people have had their egos whacked out by media attention—sincere teachers, healers, and writers seduced into believing their own PR,

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sacrificing integrity for fame. Even when the individual holds to the best intentions, fame in the spiritual marketplace is too often a double-edged sword. Look at poor Deepak Chopra and the awful misfortune he's had of succeeding so astronomically. The image of the good doctor and lifelong meditator has been nearly papered over by the beaming, affluent face on the bestseller page of the *Times*. Look at some prominent New Age divas, publicly full of prayer, privately full of mostly themselves. And look at the tendency toward self-promotion among some people who call themselves masters. The minute I smell self-promotion in someone claiming

to be liberated, I can't help but become suspicious.

Still, it's easy to criticize other people's ego trips, shooting them down like ducks at a fair. What's harder and more interesting is trying to understand what hunger underlies this human desire for fame (which many share but won't admit). Digging beneath this desire in myself, I've discovered that, in spite of all I know, there remains the fantasy that fame would somehow redeem my life, fill the emptiness, yoke me to the core of humanity—as religion means to yoke us to God—and give me everlasting love. If I were famous, the fantasy goes, I'd never feel invisible again, unheard, unsung, teetering on the edge of oblivion. I'd never be outside again; instead, this imaginary fame would pull me from the shadows into the sun, hold me at the center of creation. More than that, if this fame were to derive from the very best work I had to offer, a piece of my heart might even outlive me, gain a measure of immortality.

Recognizing the source of the yearning, the poignant futility of seeking salvation where it can't be found, transforms the issue of fame for me. The practice, I think, is not to confuse fame with love, praise with the quality of one's work, or reputation with self-worth. It's a teaching in what a Buddhist might call right relationship: to your art, to the world, to yourself. In the life of an author, it means caring for your book without believing that it's you (or that its success will save your life). It means nurturing it for the right reason: because you are moved by what it says, by the spark of truth that helped you write it in the first place. If fame results from that true effort, perhaps it needn't be harmful at all.

Time will tell, but meanwhile the joke's on me. The other day in a steam room, someone told me he'd seen my picture in a magazine. For a moment, I was flattered, waiting for a compliment. Instead, the guy said, "I thought you'd be taller."

I could only laugh. "So did I."

Contributing editor Mark Matousek's book *Sex Death Enlightenment* was recently published by Riverhead Books.

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