

## **Media and the Construction of Public Life**

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**Media in Transition 8**

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I'd like to begin with the colossal statue of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century Roman Emperor Constantine, now in the Capitoline Museum.

This image, now rather bizarrely deconstructed into a series of monumental body parts in a museum courtyard, was originally an akrolithic sculpture (that is, parts of the body were made of wood and perhaps other materials covered in bronze drapery). The statue was made for the so-called Basilica of Maxentius and Constantine, whose ruins still stand in the Roman Forum.

After his defeat of his rival, Maxentius, in 312 A.D., following a complicated series of civil wars, Constantine became sole and supreme ruler of the entire Roman Empire. He solidified his victory with a complex series of propaganda moves to legitimize his rule over all imperial territory. The most famous of these was his embrace of Christianity, a move with many interpretations and multifold influences<sup>1</sup>.

Constantine's basilica in the Roman Forum was remodeled and his colossal image placed in the apse, as can be seen in a reconstruction. The colossal image of a ruler is a tradition that goes back to ancient Egypt and the image itself reflects Phideas' famous Chryselephantine statue in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. But here there is a significant departure, for Constantine also adapted the secular form of the basilica, used for administrative structures throughout the empire, into a religious one.

In Rome's cathedral of St. John Lateran, part of the Lateran Palace complex Constantine gave to the bishops of Rome as their official residence (and still the official seat of the Pope), the basilica form becomes a church. The apse space, occupied by Constantine's, image in the basilica in the Forum, is here occupied by the altar, the bishop's throne or cathedra, and images of Christ and God the Father. Previous emperors were worshiped as gods, but only one god among the multitudinous and contentious gods of the ancient world. Constantine does this one better. He associates his name, forever, with the one and only true God, that oversees all of Heaven and Earth, just as Constantine did in the Empire.

In fact, Constantine's biography was written by Christian apologists<sup>2</sup>, he is known as "the Great," and he is revered as a saint in the Orthodox church.

The colossal head of Constantine, with its strangely staring eyes, meant to be seen from below, is no longer entirely classical. Art historians cite it as already having taken a step into the medieval: the image no longer of that of a human being but something moving beyond time and place.

Constantine was, I think, trying to move beyond mere fame or, as he would have known it, *fama*. *Fama* does not translate directly as our modern idea of fame. *Fama* means “talked about,” rumor, or reputation. *Fama*, the Romans assumed, was unstable and fickle. As a goddess, she was famously malicious. Virgil<sup>3</sup> describes her as a timid, small figure who grows monstrously, like rumors (or a viral video), until she stands with her head in the storm clouds. According to Ovid<sup>4</sup>, her home has no doors but a thousand windows. Made of bronze, it reverberates with the smallest whisper.

*Fama* is closely associated with words. In the Roman Republic, words were useful and dangerous. They were steps to acclaim and high office but they could also lead to jealousy, plots, exile, or worse.

Cicero was perhaps the iconic idea of *fama*: a man who built his fame and enormous public popularity as a lawyer, prosecutor, and government official through speaking and writing. Ultimately, he was declared an enemy of the state, pursued, and killed by his rivals<sup>5</sup>.

Similar fates befell Constantine’s predecessors as emperor. No matter how glorious and powerful they were in life, their imperial *fama* was typically unstable. They could easily be defamed in death, and were by historians patronized by their successors<sup>6</sup>.

In his own unearthly imagery, Constantine seems to reach beyond *fama* to something closer to our idea of celebrity. Unlike fame, celebrity is binary: it either is or it isn’t. It is also transcendent: rumor and slander may swirl around it but they somehow do not dent it. Whether the celebrity is famous or infamous becomes irrelevant. The celebrity is above all a celebrity: a class apart from mere humans, who remain at the mercy of *fama*.

Unlike *fama*, celebrity is particularly visual. Images, unlike words, operate in the semi-conscious plane of symbols. If presented in a powerful way, images can be difficult to pin down or dismiss. If the image is grand enough, the smallness of the subject can be forgotten. This power of images is magnified as they are reproduced and become more familiar. Thus the image-reproducing capacities of new technologies, starting with photography, powerfully expanded the capacity of celebrity to shape culture and power.

Take, as a case study, Lisa Gheradini, the wife of the Florentine silk merchant and politician Francesco del Giocondo. La Gioconda lived a quiet and comfortable upper middle-class life in Renaissance Florence, raised five children of her own and a step son, and died around 1551.

Lisa Gheradini is, of course, famous as the subject of a portrait by Leonardo da Vinci, commissioned by her husband and begun around 1503. On public display in the Louvre Museum since 1797, this famous work is believed to be the one mentioned by Giorgio Vasari in his biography of Leonardo<sup>7</sup>. Never delivered, the painting remained in

Leonardo's possession until he died. Leonardo's last patron, the French king Francis I, acquired the work from Leonard's heir.

For centuries, Leonardo's painting was admired and famous though hardly famous above all others. Then Lisa Gheradini's portrait underwent a metamorphosis. On August 22, 1911, painter visiting the Louvre found her portrait had disappeared from the Salon Carré, where it had been hanging. An embarrassed, one images, museum administration soon realized it had been stolen. It remained missing until 1913, when a former Louvre employee, Vincenzo Peruggia, tried to sell it to the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Peruggia, an Italian nationalist who claimed he stole the painting for patriotic reasons, had simply hidden the painting under his clothes and had simply walked out with it<sup>8</sup>.

The subsequent media storm over the left made the so-called Mona Lisa the most famous work of art in the world, endlessly reproduced and satirized. Thus the portrait of Lisa Gheradini followed Jean Beaudrillard's paradigm of the image in modern media:

"These would be the successive phases of the image:

1. It is the reflection of a basic reality.
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality.
3. It masks the *absence* of a basic reality.
4. It bears no relation to any reality whatever: it i sits own pure simulacrum."<sup>9</sup>

Because movies and television are visual and endlessly and mechanically repeat images, they have become the locus of this process of celebrity reaching beyond the real. Andy Warhol's famous series of deadpan, mechanically serigraphed portraits of Marilyn Munroe, Elizabeth Taylor, and other celebrities, depicted in unnatural, garish colors, intuitis this process of endless reiteration. As Walter Benjamin put it in his famous 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility."<sup>10</sup>

The end point of celebrity is perhaps the celebrity specifically created to fill a blank space, a hollow gap, in public perception. One such was Sarah Palin, governor of Alaska, chosen by 2008 Presidential Candidate John McCain to revive his dull and fading campaign.

Although Palin was not without talents or accomplishments, she quickly became a kind of Mona Lisa of American politics, instantly recognizable by such iconic visual signs as hairdo, glasses, and makeup, as well as such catch phrases, probably manufactured by political consultants, as "bridge to nowhere," "thanks but no thanks," and "pit bull with lipstick." Her entire persona was satirized to the point where it was difficult to know where Palin ended and the imitations began.

Palin not only amply filled a yawning void in John McCain's campaign, she fulfilled the media's need for soap-opera like drama, gossip, family scandal, and material for late-

night jokes and water-cooler buzz. Tina Fey became a celebrity known for portraying the celebrity version of Sarah Palin. Fey's simulation was so successful that her comic lines are often attributed to Palin herself. In the end, Palin seemed to be more someone pretending to be Tina Fey pretending to be Sarah Palin than she seemed to be herself. Subsequently it became hard (and probably irrelevant) to tell whether Palin (in the TLC TV reality series, "Sarah Palin's Alaska" for example) was a politician playing a TV celebrity or a TV celebrity created by politics. In the end, she became her own simulacrum.

New social media, like the appropriately named FaceBook, offer this sort of progression, at least on a modest scale, to everyone who signs up. And this suggests a trap. In an age where everything is recorded, instantly transmitted, and available everywhere, when it is easier than every to become a celebrity, celebrities are no longer masters of their own celebrity. They have vanished into it.

<sup>1</sup> See Michael Grant, *Constantine the Great: The Man and His Times* (New York, Scribner Book Company, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Life of Constantine*, 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The manuscript, a panegyric, was left unfinished at the author's death in 339. Eusebius was the Bishop of Caesarea and an early historian of the church. His book begins by declaring Constantine "immortal" and continues to deify the emperor for his work in establishing Christianity in the Empire.

<sup>3</sup> Aeneid, 4, 173-197. Virgil's descriptions of *Fama* emphasize the verbal and the monstrous. Her spread of rumors has striking parallels with "going viral" on the Internet.

<sup>4</sup> Metamorphoses, 12, 39-64.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Everitt, *Cicero: The Life and Times of Rome's Greatest Politician* (New York: Random House, 2003) among innumerable other biographies.

<sup>6</sup> The most famous example being Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*. Suetonius was the Emperor Hadrian's secretary before he was dismissed for an affair he had with the Empress.

<sup>7</sup> In Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, first published in Florence in 1550, available in many translations and editions.

<sup>8</sup> Among the many accounts of this comic opera episode (including two picture books for children) is R.A. Scotti *Vanished Smile: The Mysterious Theft of the Mona Lisa* (New York: Vintage, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* in Mark Poster, editor, *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, second edition, revised and expanded (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction* (CreateSpace, 2010).