CELEBRITY CULTURE IN THE HUNGER GAMES AND THE FAULT IN OUR STARS

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Abstract

The concept of celebrity that has developed out of the young adult Internet culture is significant to the trends and topics in the most popular novels of young adult fiction. Graeme Turner’s idea of the “demotic turn,” or the trend towards the celebrity of the “ordinary person,” dominates not only cable television, Twitter, and the blogosphere – it is also present in YA literature. We see this in the online communities of young adult fans that have cropped up around works like The Hunger Games, the Twilight series and Harry Potter, as well as in some of the works themselves. It seems to matter little whether the subject of fanfare is an actor, a real person, or a fictional hero. This paper examines the phenomenon of online fandom and society’s newest iteration of “celebrity” in two YA novels: John Green’s The Fault In Our Stars and Suzanne Collins’s The Hunger Games. Both novels address celebrity culture for teenagers and Western culture as a whole, and transmit cautionary messages about the future of a world obsessed with reality entertainment.

Keywords: celebrity culture, fame, reality shows, young adult literature, the demotic turn, dystopian future

IN A WORLD where terms like “image macro” and “going viral” are part of virtually all young adults’ vernacular, it is clear that the association of the Internet with celebrity culture is only going to become greater. The generation that grew up with Lolcats and Twitter is going to be ceaselessly searching for the next big online trend, and the savvy young adult (YA) literature industry knows this. Publishing companies and authors in this and other literary genres use Internet marketing or “platform building” to gain readers.

Many readers are familiar with The Hunger Games and John Green’s near-canonized novel about children with cancer, The Fault in Our Stars. They may be less familiar with other young adult novels, including – some by people who were already celebrities when they published in the genre (Snooki or Lauren Conrad or Joseph Gordon-Levitt). But YA authors who don’t already have the benefit of an established fan base know that, in all likelihood, if they want their books to be successful they are essentially required to market themselves online via Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. In doing so, YA authors demonstrate the idea of “the demotic turn.” Critic Graeme Turner coined the phrase to describe the “increasing visibility of the ‘ordinary person’ as they turn themselves into media content through celebrity culture, reality TV, DIY websites, talk radio,” et cetera (Turner 153). Using the idea of the demotic turn in conjunction with The Hunger Games and The Fault in Our Stars, I will argue that we have become a reality-show culture, and our obsession with celebrity is detrimental. These two young adult novels support my thesis, as they both warn against the celebritization of the ordinary person in various ways.

I began my research on The Hunger Games by looking at the public and critical response to the novel and the film adaptation. I was confident I would find substantial commentary on the novel’s theme of celebrity and reality show obsession, and its prediction of a world in which the government has turned that
obsession into a deadly oppressive force. Surprisingly, most of the reviews I read barely mentioned the celebrity aspect, if at all. The pop culture magazine *Paste* wrote about Collins's use of classical mythology, asking questions such as, “Is it really such a stretch to imagine that someday, somewhere, we might see human beings hunt one another for our entertainment?” (McNair). But the article brushes off the question, turning towards the inspiration of Greek myths and Grimm Brothers fairytales rather than continue its reality-show culture critique.

Many critics saw the text as an allegory for concepts from high school to capitalism, but rarely addressed the fact that the protagonist, Katniss Everdeen, provides a first person narrative that eschews any motives except surviving and protecting her family. None of Katniss’s crucial decisions revolve around dating or love, despite the attempts by her overlords to coerce her into flirtation and romance. She uses her two main love interests, Peeta and Gale, as resources not unlike her bow and arrow, or her wildlife smarts. As soon as Katniss volunteers as tribute to the Games (to save her sister, who is picked at random), she calculates every move she makes to stay in the graces of her nationwide television audience, indicating the permeation of reality show obsession in her society. Even though, as far as readers know, she has never been in front of a camera, she expertly manipulates the Game to her advantage from the words “I volunteer.” This not only speaks to her familiarity with the annual, ritually televised game and how to perform for it, but also to how reality television can easily be turned into a literal Big Brother government eye, one that children are versed in protecting themselves from.

The real life American media’s lack of response to the novel’s critique of reality show culture in fact mimics the response that the novel’s media has to *the Hunger Games*. Much like the way the citizens of the hedonistic Capitol play into Katniss’s performance as star-crossed lover with Peeta, the media and critical response in real life mostly ignores, or even accepts, the fact that the story is about children killing other children for television entertainment. As I was thinking about this, a Tumblr post by “theindependentvigilante” showed up on my dashboard, observing that "the fact that the books aren't supposed to be all about the love triangle yet that's the only thing the media really cares about. Do you all realize that is exactly what the capitol paid attention to too. [Their] main focus was that damn love triangle and our media does the same thing" ("My favorite part of the Hunger Games").

In other words, while the novel is criticizing the media and celebrity culture, the real-life media focus on the same thing the Capitol does in the novel: the drama, the love triangle, the celebrity.

When Willow Shields, the actress playing Katniss’s younger sister, was asked in an interview whether she is “Team Peeta” or “Team Gale,” she replied that she is “Team Katniss,” saying, “It’s all about her, she’s just such a great character that in the end, it has to be Team Katniss” (Li). Shields’s comment indicates the importance of not defining Katniss’s character through her relationships. It also highlights the disturbing absurdity of fixating on romantic relationships and love triangles in a narrative about theatrical brutality. In real life as in the novel, the media are seduced by the romantic story and ignore what is important. The name of the country in which the Hunger Games take place, Panem, is short for *panem et circenses*, meaning “bread and circuses,” a metonym coined by Juvenal to critique first century Roman society: so long as the government is able to feed and entertain the people, even in a gristly manner, the people are appeased.
What makes Katniss’s story significant in this context is that she is able to play the Game and simultaneously upset it through her performance. She is, in a sense, part of the demotic turn because she is such an ordinary person who is turned into a star overnight. The critic Barry King notes in his piece on stardom and celebrity that “…it is important on ethical grounds to distinguish between persons of real accomplishment and those who in some sense fake or forge the credentials for renown. If a celebrity is a mere creature of publicity, a star could be usefully defined as a heroic performer” (King 7). By this definition Katniss’s fame is because she is a “heroic performer” – she is not simply famous for being a tribute, or even “the girl on fire,” but for what she accomplishes. The government tries to use her for entertainment -- she is at first made famous by their mechanism – but she volunteers as tribute and then uses her fame to spark a revolution.

The negative implications for real-world obsession with celebrity is not the only message in The Hunger Games. John Green wrote a review of the novel for the New York Times back in 2008, noting that Collins’s writing “disappears in the way a good font does: nothing stands between Katniss and the reader, between Panem and America.” If Collins is successful in closely aligning the readers with Katniss, then there is hope that they will understand that what has happened to Katniss in Panem could happen to them in real life. What Collins is warning against – the dangerous obsession with celebrity – can be recognized and resisted by people who can become or admire “heroic performers” rather than passive “creatures of publicity.”

John Green’s novel, The Fault in Our Stars, is not an obvious choice for examining the celebrity phenomenon, but it is in fact ideal for two reasons. In the novel, the protagonist’s love interest, Augustus, is essentially obsessed with heroic performance. And Green himself is representative of the demotic turn. John Green published his first novel, Looking for Alaska, in 2005 to very little attention. In 2007 Green started a YouTube blog with his brother with no apparent intention of fame, or boosting his name value for his novels. It has been the period of time since 2007 that celebrity via YouTube has become a common occurrence, and viral videos have netted individuals fame and money on a practically weekly basis. For Green it has worked out quite well, netting him a committed and passionate fan base – and indeed Looking for Alaska finally broke the New York Times bestseller list in 2012.

The Fault in Our Stars includes an epigraph “quoted” from a fictional book (An Imperial Affliction) by a nonexistent author, Peter Van Houten. Hazel and Augustus go to Amsterdam to find Van Houten, and the interaction feels as though Green is using the trope of the fictional author to speak to his readers about idolization of an author as a celebrity. Van Houten turns out to be entirely disappointing to Hazel and Augustus, and has a personality quite the opposite of Green: he is a recluse, uninterested in fans or fan mail, he explicitly denounces the Internet. Yet even the fact that this is opposed to Green’s own strong online presence can be read as a commentary on how contemporary celebrity works, because Van Houten is not engaging in the behaviors required by his cultural consumers, and his disinterest in performing makes him a disappointment to them.

Ultimately, the novel argues that obsession even with heroic performance is dangerous, that it is still part of the cultural obsession with celebrity and fame. Augustus’s preoccupation with grand gestures and his defiance of the inevitable oblivion of his life are reminiscent not only of an ever-growing cultural obsession with fame but also the sense that fame or celebrity is the endgame of being alive. In a previous novel, An Abundance of
Katherines, one of Green’s characters asked, “What’s the point of being alive if you don’t at least try to do something remarkable?” Green spends the rest of that novel arguing the fallibility of this point.

The same can be said for The Fault in Our Stars. Augustus yearns for an epic life, leading Hazel to nickname him “Grand Gesture Gus.” He is obsessed with the nobility of sacrifice; he wants his obituary in all of the newspapers; he constantly plays a video game in which he can die for other characters, over and over again. Augustus has matured in a world where anyone can become a celebrity for the most mundane of reasons, and he has come to believe that in order to be worth anything he has to become famous for doing something important. Augustus would probably envy Katniss’s heroic performance and her opportunity to die for the greater good. But Hazel calls Augustus out on this obsession. She tells him that “It’s really mean […] to say that the only lives that matter are the ones that are lived for something or die for something” (169). Here Green is telling his teenage target audience that living an entirely ordinary life is nothing to be ashamed of and is, in fact, a privilege, particularly for Hazel and Augustus. He sends the message that even if your desire for fame comes from a desire to give the world “some great sign of your heroism,” you are still going to be trapped by the celebrity-culture mechanism.

The topic of that mechanism is evident in the very title of the novel, which is taken from Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar. In the play, Caesar says, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." Caesar is emphasizing the autonomy of the individual in shaping one’s own destiny rather than being shaped by it. For the John Green novel, the title is ironic—the characters have no control over the fact that they have cancer, but the reference still emphasizes the focus on destiny, on the heroic life. Using the Shakespearean language of stars, meaning destiny, has a heroic ring to it, while also contextualized in the modern day as a term synonymous with celebrity.

Green’s novel suggests that people who want to be famous for a vapid YouTube video are perhaps not so different from those who want to be remembered for something heroic, no matter what that is. The desire to be immortalized at any cost seems ultimately born out of a fear of oblivion, and unless we are careful, that desperation en masse may yet lead us to the moral turpitude of Panem: sitting at the edge of our seats, desperate children scattered across our screens, waiting for the games to begin.

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Works Cited


