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The Two Bodies of Achieved Celebrity

Chris Rojek *

Abstract: »Die zwei Körper bei erreichter Berühmtheit«. From Medieval to Tudor times, the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies was fundamental in government and the reproduction of social order. The doctrine held that the body of the monarch is simultaneously mortal and immortal. In terms of the hegemony of the power regime, this was given by God. It has long been assumed that the rise of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy put an end to Royal absolutism. This paper uses the political thought of Carl Schmitt and Ernst Hartwig Kantorowicz to examine if this assumption is valid. The paper argues that the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies survives in greatly translated form. The highest achieved celebrities today have two bodies, the one (biological and incorrigible), the other (mediated and incorrigible). The paper uses data from the posthumous existence of the highest achieved celebrities to substantiate this proposition. In turn, this leads to the beginnings of an enquiry into what the role of achieved celebrity in Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy, i.e., a society based on the principle of homogeneous equality, might be.

Keywords: Immortality, fame, ascribed celebrity, achieved celebrity, attention capital.

1. Introduction

It is in the nature of ascribed celebrity to make ultimate appeals to the necessity and relevance of its *raison d'être* by reaching out to the rubrics of cosmology and tradition. After all, for ascribed celebrity, fame is not primarily a matter of talent, skill, or accomplishment. Rather, it is the gift of heredity (Rojek 2001). Prestigious bloodline delivers public renown, so that even an infant of royal blood is instantly famous. This is a direct reflection of immemorial privilege and custom. Typically, it is originally justified on *a priori* grounds, by reason of popular faith in the decree of a deity, a group of deities, or some other supernatural force, of some sort. Historically speaking, this is apparent in the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies. To our way of thinking, it is absurd to claim that a mortal can have two bodies. Conversely, for the Tudor kings of England and their courtiers, it was an article of faith, no less obvious and stead-

* Chris Rojek, Department of Sociology, City University of London, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, United Kingdom; chris.rojek.1@city.ac.uk.

fast than the certainty that the sunset will be followed by the sunrise. The doctrine may be investigated here to clarify some of the unusual features of ascribed and achieved celebrity, as well as the metaphysical nexus that both ultimately, share.

In Kantorowicz's famous study, he argued that the doctrine has its roots in medieval theology (Kantorowicz 1957). Like all counter-intuitive doctrines, a little elucidation is required to illuminate this now forgotten cast of mind. After all, we are accustomed to the idea that we have a single body, which is born, matures, and eventually dies. For most people, this is the beginning and end of the matter. Against this, it must be said that we are not monarchs, or perhaps it is better to say, *Tudor* monarchs. The latter took it as an irreproachable given that they possessed two bodies. As with all men and women, one body is biological and corruptible. The other is ruled by God to be incorruptible, and so eternal. In this second, but co-equal sense, the monarch is not a mere man or woman, but a *character angelicus*, a living immortal (Raffield 2017, 37). Somewhat more than a self-regarding, cranky point of view is at issue here. It is not just that Tudor monarchs thought about religion and embodiment in ways that contrast starkly with the present day. They also used this way of thinking, and acting, for political ends.

Consider briefly the case of Henry VIII (1491-1547). Most readers will know that Henry VIII had six wives and was responsible for the English Reformation. The role of the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies in his reign is less popularly appreciated. What is the issue here, and how does it relate to the topic of celebrity?

First, it is necessary to be clear about the unique nature of ascribed celebrity that Henry eventually claimed was his due. In 1503, the eleven year old Henry VIII married Catherine of Aragon, the widow of his brother, Arthur. The union failed to produce a surviving male heir. This created a major crisis in the relationship and in the affairs of state. For, to Henry's way of thinking, the cause of regal supremacy required him to have a son. This, together with his infatuation with Anne Boleyn, led him to press for a divorce from Catherine which, he knew, the Pope was unlikely to condone. Only something extraordinary could persuade Rome to grant Henry's desire for divorce. But whither the grounds? In order to understand the mind-set of the king, it is necessary to remark that this was not a question that Henry asked of other men, he asked it of God. What, in God's view, could permit Henry to legitimately divorce Catherine? The answer was found in the *Book of Leviticus*. Henry believed that a passage here dissolved the legality of his marriage to Catherine:

If a man shall take his brother's wife,
it is an impurity. He hath uncovered
his brother's nakedness: they shall be
childless (Leviticus 20,12).

Henry was convinced that no Pope could contravene this edict. His argument was that scripture was superior to papal authority and canon law in faithfully interpreting the word of God (Redworth 1987, 32). Leviticus provided him with the pretext to insist that only divorce would cleanse his (unintended) sin. Even at this high point of ascribed celebrity, it was not sufficient for Henry to make his case alone. He already required experts, or in the language of Celebrity Studies today, ‘cultural intermediaries,’ to represent him to Rome in the best light. Foremost among his appointees was Edward Foxe, Provost of King’s College, Cambridge. The tract that Foxe and his associates prepared was indeed fit for a monarch who saw himself as first among men and answerable only to God. According to them, the pope is categorized as nothing more than the ‘bishop’ of God’s diocese, i.e., Rome. In contrast, Henry is nominated as ‘God’s Vicar on earth.’ It was not merely a distinction that privileged Henry, it exalted him. This anointed position situated the King in a relation of supreme power over his dominions, the clergy, and the laity (Guy 2014). By definition, no mortal was recognized to possess the authority to question his jurisdiction. The King had a duty to God, and to God alone was he accountable.

The incisive effect of the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies was to achieve a type of cultural transference which *prima facie* seems improbable, if not impossible (Greenblat 2009, 65). The immutability of the king in time was transferred from the sphere of theology to the sphere of law. That is to say, the metaphysical pretext for granting the King consummate, earthly authority was traced into the law books and court practices. The chief consequence of this was that theology was historically the footprint from which modern legality and politics took its cue. Revelation, drama, and ritual, which were the hallmarks of Christian religion, became keynotes of political practice (Kahn 2009, 77). As Western society developed the plebiscitary form of Parliamentary Democracy, the naked influence of religious theology on political practice became sedimented with innumerable secular justifications, rational codicils, and caveats. The fact that terrestrial factors have stepped up to take the place of God in ordering the affairs of mankind did not mean that politics freed itself from its metaphysical roots. Rather, reason, which after the Enlightenment, indiscriminately promulgated equality, liberty, and justice as the fundamental rights of man, remained the servant of presuppositions that were metaphysical in origin.

The main argument of this paper is that, in the politics and culture of the present day, the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies survives. However, as we shall see presently, it does so in a form much altered since the Tudor period. It has transferred over from ascribed celebrity to achieved celebrity. Before coming to this in more detail, it is necessary to go a bit further into the proposition that political theology and practice is the child of metaphysics.

2. Schmitt and the Dance of Liberal Fictions

Kantorowicz's argument is partly an engagement with the discredited German legal theorist and prominent jurist, Carl Schmitt.¹ The latter argued famously in the 1920s that the modern secular state is based finally not upon the might of reason but upon the legacy of religion. The political concepts of the state are secularized transformations of theological precedents. The base of all politics is therefore judged to be metaphysics. Normative order is raised and maintained upon this foundation; however, it comes with a major problem. The metaphysical conundrums engrained in the central concepts of liberalism, saddle Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy with intractable, repeated dilemmas of system reproduction. For Schmitt, these conundrums stubbornly recur because the essential metaphysical contradictions of liberalism are insoluble. Liberal Plebiscitary Parliaments must operate in a context in which it is perfectly obvious that globally driven, multinational corporations have no political loyalties as such. The notion that "one man, one vote" amounts to anything meaningful in a world where global, corporate power decisively influences resource distribution and political accommodation is naïve. For Schmitt, there is something inherently superficial about the philosophy of liberalism. On this reckoning, the fate of Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy is sadly a most onerous and pitiful one. Because the real distribution of power is contrary to what Parliament purports it to be, the fate of Plebiscitary Democracy is to perpetually promise what, perpetually, it cannot deliver. Therefore, it is continually vulnerable to the objection that the system as a whole is not working and cannot live up to the lofty standards that it has set itself.

Schmitt contends that, what Habermas (1975) later called "the legitimation crisis" of Western liberalism is intrinsic to the bricks and mortar of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy. The only serious question is whether it remains latent or becomes manifest. In 1985, he deployed a battery of arguments to advance this case. Foremost among them is the proposition that the logic of liberalism is profoundly faulty. The central tenet of every known democracy is equality (Schmitt 1985, 13-16). If equality means anything, it means that all under its roof are homogeneous. By this token, it is incomprehensible to describe the society of the Tudor Kings as a democracy. For one thing, the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies inflexibly arrogates divine rights to the monarch. Henry VIII believed that he was entitled to defy papal law because the king is the exception to the public law. The Medieval and Tudor state, therefore, determined that it is in the essence of sovereign power to have one foot in normative order, and the other in the realm of the divine. The king's

¹ Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) was a political theorist and legal jurist who, as we shall see, was ruined in academic and public life by reason of his perceived complicity with Nazism.

power derives finally, from the popular faith that the sovereign is, so to speak, 'super-normative.' In the sight of ordinary men and women, the character of the courtly power that surrounds him is a *corpus mysticum*.² This means that in Medieval (and Tudor) theology the monarch is understood to be *potestas absoluta in terra*, i.e., to be among men, but to co-exist with autonomous motion not given to others (Herrero 2015, 1165).³

Democracy expunges this principle from its estate. There is good reason for this. By definition, democracy is a society of equals, i.e., equal rights of enfranchisement and equal liberties before the law. It cannot defer to heterogeneity since to do so would be to compromise its *raison d'être*. Thus, to Schmitt's way of thinking, liberal democracy cannot be *truly* tolerant and inclusive. It is compelled to show a militaristic lack of tolerance and vigilant exclusivity to individuals and groups bringing heterogeneous characteristics and traits of behaviour that imperil the principle of homogeneity. This alone compromises the claim of liberalism to be a society of equals. In its bearing towards heterogeneity, it is finally exclusive and punitive. For example, it proclaims equality for all living within its territorial boundaries, but suspects aliens and foreigners because they do not conform to its standards of homogeneity. Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy is, in actuality, the indentured servant of metaphysics.

According to Schmitt (1985), this is far from being an end to the matter. For one thing, the proposition that liberalism is antithetical to heterogeneity means that it requires enemies and foes in order to uphold and refurbish its 'way of life.' This means that liberal democracies oblige a war-like orientation in their framework, if not in their demeanour.

There is also the problem of the integral, fictive nature of equality under liberalism. In order to illustrate what is at stake here, Schmitt (1985, 10) tellingly alights upon the example of the British Empire.⁴ The British portrayed their Empire as a morally virtuous project of nation-building on the grounds that it proclaimed and enforced equal, impartial standards of liberty and justice wherever its flag was raised and flown. With inexorable logic, Schmitt admonishes the moral politics of this project as an absurdity. He regards it to be a grotesque, self-serving philosophy, fit for a bargee land-grabber, but in no way acceptable to any jurist worth his salt. Of the more than 400 million inhabitants

² *Corpus mysticum* literally means 'mystical body' (Kantorowicz 1957, 15). Its original referent was the Eucharist, or consecrated host. That is the symbol of Christ (and therefore God) in the normative order. Gradually, the notion evolved to refer to the idea that the Church is immutable.

³ The term 'autonomous motion' refers to frictionless movement over others.

⁴ Schmitt wrote this after the Treaty of Versailles (1919), which was widely regarded to be punitive in its requirements over the Germans. His doubts about the integrity of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy surely derive from what John Maynard Keynes scathingly referred to as a 'Carthaginian Peace' of Versailles.

in the British Empire of Schmitt's day, he calculated that over 300 million were not recognized as British citizens (Schmitt 1985, 10). Their rights and status were fudged by British ideologues through spinning constructs of administrative convenience. By designating the adopted lands as 'colonies,' 'protectorates,' or governed by 'mandates' or 'intervention treaties,' their heterogeneous cultures were permitted to persist in their accustomed way of life, but only under sufferance to the sovereign Parliament of Westminster. If ultimate proof were needed to show the fictive character of equality in the British Empire all that is required is to look at the condition of the 'native' population. Deprived of the franchise and the civil rights enjoyed by the white settler and colonial governing population, the natives are embraced by the empire, but strictly as subordinate citizens. The empire depends upon their labour, but requires them to be a subject class in the public realm.

When all is said and done, Schmitt (1985) concluded that, under the roof of liberal democracy, in which all nominally enjoy the same shelter, rights, and advantages, there is, in actuality, one law for the few and another for the majority. Thus, the feted principle of equality is not truly realized. In Schmitt's perspective, there is nothing surprising about this. If one moves away from the case of the British Empire to consider the validity of equality as a universal political right, things in liberalism fall apart in short order. People do not face one another as abstractions, but as "politically interested," "politically determined" persons (Schmitt 1985, 11). To subtract these interests and determinations from human encounters would be very far from leaving a balance of abstract equality which, 'under the surface of difference,' genuinely unites mankind.

This is because abstract equality is vacuous since it does not recognize that all personas are "politically interested" and "politically determined." "An absolute human equality, then," Schmitt concludes, "would be an equality understood only in terms of itself and without risk; it would be an equality without the necessary correlate of inequality, and as a result, conceptually and practically meaningless, an indifferent equality" (Schmitt 1985, 12).

Where the reproduction dilemmas of liberalism become manifest and resist liberal parliamentary homilies, the stage is set for strong leaders to step out of the wings and take charge (Schmitt 2005). The strong leader is an achieved celebrity who possesses boldness combined with clarity of vision to sweep aside the parliamentary bottleneck and take decisive actions that count. The superior power of the sovereign leader resides in the capacity to "decide the exception" (Schmitt 2005, 36). Then, in spite of their differences, monarchies and republics are alike in important respects. The omnipotent dictator resembles the omnipotent God, both analogically and in terms of autonomous motion (Roberts 2015, 467). Thus, the strong leader in the republic operates on the logic that he too possesses the power to 'decide the exception.' Correspondingly, it should be noted that this feature is a prime element in accounting for their

glamour with the public. In conditions of emergency or crisis wherein Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy is in default, liberalism unintentionally provides for ‘strong leaders’ to save the day. At the time that he was writing the studies for which he remains most famous (and notorious), Mussolini and Hitler were emerging as veritable ‘saviours’ of their respective nations. But this is not the main component in the balance to be extracted from Schmitt’s thought here.

3. The Problem of Jurisdiction

In Tudor England, an obvious question was raised by the doctrine that the monarch has absolute jurisdiction over people of all ranks. Was the King, who issues the laws of the land, also bound by them (Shoemaker 2017)? Not surprisingly, Henry’s attempt to use Leviticus to annul his marriage to Catherine was refused by the Pope. In revenge, Henry sacked the authority and privileges of Rome. He declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England and broke with the Papacy. Eventually, his hubris was ablated by excommunication from the Church of Rome. Far from being downcast, Henry regarded excommunication to vindicate the justice of his case. Those in England who opposed the Acts of Supremacy and Succession were brutally punished. At bottom, Henry proclaimed that he had breached the rule of a thousand years, which ordained that kings rule the bodies of their subjects, while it is for the pope to govern their souls. Now he declared himself to be doubly empowered, the body and soul of all in his dominion were henceforth to be at his command. Among all ascribed celebrities in history, he was determined to be first without equal.

As a case study of ascribed celebrity, Henry VIII is peerless. He was the double exception. As we have seen, merely by virtue of bloodline, the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies was sufficient to afford him instant fame. What heightened this to a stratospheric level was his conscious insistence that he was the Vicar of God, overriding the Holy Church of Rome. Thus, he became the defender of not only a territorialized earthly realm but also a divine religion in defiance of Rome that was destined to girdle the world by means of empire. In Christendom, this was unprecedented. For our purposes, it should be noted that this was not only a matter of practical statecraft; it was also, quite deliberately, a strategy of personal aggrandizement. Henry’s intent was to make his fame ubiquitous and beyond peradventure. By his own lights, the Most High and Most Excellent of Kings was also meant to be venerated as the world’s foremost ascribed celebrity. Prior to him, no other monarch in Christendom had sought to ‘decide the exception’ so dramatically. The judicial foundation for all of this pomp and panoply was the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies. But the quest for immortal, global fame was the spur.

Henry VIII was far from being the last English Monarch to make use of the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies as a stratagem to claim exceptionalism. In

1649, when the Stuart King, Charles I, was brought to trial on the charge of treason by the leaders of the revolutionary army, of whom Oliver Cromwell was the foremost, he made repeated recourse to the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies. The prosecution alleged that the king was "trusted with a limited power" which he rendered forfeit "out of a wicked design to erect and uphold himself an unlimited and tyrannical power to rule according to his will" (Petrie 1935, 241). The prerogatives of Charles were condemned as sheer pretence, designed to advance and uphold a personal interest against the public good, common rights, liberty, justice and peace of the nation (Petrie 1935, 243). The heart of Charles's defence was that his prosecutors had no lawful authority to submit him suffer trial. His privileged position over all other men and women, he argued, was commended by old and lawful descent, directly ordained by God (Petrie 1935, 245). "A king cannot be tried by any superior jurisdiction on earth" asserted Charles (Petrie 1935, 248). To the wrath of the court, he stuck to his guns on this fundamental principle. Like Henry VIII before him, Charles insisted that he was God's vicar and, therefore, was independent of the commands and judgements of men. It came to no profit. The court condemned him to death. On January 29th, 1649, as he faced the judgement of the axe, he was said to have commented, to the Bishop of London, "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where there will be no more trouble" (Petrie 1935, 273). The mortal body comes to dust, while the divine body joins the immortals.

Now, it might be considered that these matters between God and ascribed celebrity have no bearing on the analysis of achieved celebrity today. It is reasonable to suppose that the matter of the King's Two Bodies was settled with the execution of Charles I. To this line of argument, it might first be objected that the respect shown to the proposition that the dynamics of ascribed celebrity have anything to impart to achieved celebrities today is untenable. It goes without saying that ascribed celebrity continues to be a feature of the social order. But its absolutist credentials have been falsified. The doctrine of the King's Two Bodies has no place in the world of science and 'one man/one vote.' But is it sound to propose that achieved celebrity, which has supplanted it, is free from metaphysics or the vestiges of the *corpus mysticum* from which it emerged?

With the displacement of the monarch from the pinnacle of renown, the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies fell on increasingly deaf ears. Parliamentary Democracy had finally overthrown the absolutism of the monarch and formally, at least, crushed the divine precept upon which exceptionalism resided. It could not have been clearer, or more binding. The body of the *demos* has replaced the two bodies of the king (Turner 2004, 2009). Contrarily, if anything is to be preserved from Schmitt's (1985) critique of equality, it is the insight that Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy is a sham. Royal absolutism has been overcome. What remains is not, however, a homogeneous community

of equals. Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy perpetuates a real heterogeneity of power that the gloss of formal homogeneity denies. This is evident in the unequal political/cultural power that the rich have in comparison with the poor. It is also apparent that some individuals, despite being formally equal with the body politic, accumulate and advance cultural capital over others, which makes them extremely unequal in terms of status differentiation.

Within the Liberal Parliamentary system, Schmitt's (2005) principle of he who 'decides the exception' has survived as, what might be called, a 'reserve procedure' of political authority, i.e., it is implemented when the ordinary procedures of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy are perceived as being at a loss to resolve a major structural crisis or emergency.

Consecutively, it is by no means self-evident that this is the only, or even the most important, manifestation in society of the principle. In order to understand the full import of this proposition, we need to probe more deeply into the question of how Liberal Democracy is perceived by the electorate. Of course, this is a complex, many-sided matter. But one measure of relevance and trust in the political system that no-one can argue with is electoral turnout in General Elections. In the five elections in the UK since 2001, turnout has ranged between 59.4% and 66.1%. In other words, nearly one third of those eligible to vote do not exercise their right.⁵ Turning to the European Parliament, in no General Election since 1994 has turn out been above the 50% mark. Half of all European citizens who have the right to vote refrain from doing so.⁶ Things are not much better in the US. On average, since 1972, a little over 50% of eligible adults have bothered to vote in Presidential elections.⁷

These figures appear to bear out Schmitt's (1985), thesis that Liberal Parliamentary Democracy perpetually fails to deliver what it perpetually promises. Its writ of competence does not have the full mandate of the people. Some commentators have characterized Liberal Democracy as a system of government that, at best, 'muddles through' (Runciman 2013). Others have argued that it is not as a genuine democracy, but a 'managed democracy' which serves the interests of the state-corporate axis (Wolin 2008, 136-7). These analytical classifications, together with the low electoral turnouts recounted above, do not suggest that Liberal Parliamentary Plebiscitary Democracy is in a rude state of health.

On the contrary, they imply that the political system produces low trust relations, i.e., the electorate do not believe that their vote will make a difference (Wolin 2008, 197). Low trust relations in organized politics breed a low trust society, in which atomization, alienation, and a sense of powerlessness are commonplace. People look for high trust relations in other quarters. Some of

⁵ Source: <www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout.45.htm>.

⁶ Source: <www.ukpolitical.info/european-parliament-election-turnout.htm>.

⁷ Source: <www.presidency.ucsb.edu/data/turnout.php>.

this might be found in the community action groups and larger social movements that Beck (1992) referred to as ‘sub-politics.’ In these extra-parliamentary settings, many people search for the clarity, decisiveness, and moral belonging that Parliament fails to deliver. Sub-politics are not alone in this respect. It is no accident that the culture of achieved celebrity has expanded in direct proportion to the expansion of popular knowledge, (through education, the mass media, and social media), of the reproduction dilemmas of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy. Today, the power ‘to decide the exception,’ and escape and transcend normative order, so as to give a higher sense of subjective purpose and moral belonging, is prosaically found in the personality cults surrounding higher achieved celebrities. The sense of autonomous motion and the power to ‘decide the exception’ that they convey is the fundamental resource in their attention capital.

Before endeavouring to put flesh upon these bones, it is incumbent to declare plainly that, procedurally, there are steep impediments in the path of adopting Schmitt and Kantorowicz as reputable influences. As a Weimar legal theorist and, in time, a ‘Crown Jurist,’ Schmitt participated eagerly, and enthusiastically, in the attempt to justify Nazi rule (Minca and Rowan 2014, A1; Mehring 2014). He was a fervent anti-Semite. He defended Hitler’s extrajudicial killings of political opponents and the ‘cleansing’ of German Jurisprudence of Jewish influence (Gross 2007). His vigorous defence of the necessity for ‘he who decides the exception’ in the moments of crisis faced by liberal democracy brilliantly revealed the hypocrisy of Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy in submitting that it had done with absolutism and sovereign rule. But Schmitt’s contribution was not just to invert a fallible load-bearing beam of liberalism. Inevitably, it also opened-up a pretext for absolutist solutions to be imposed upon the reproduction dilemma of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy. Whether intentionally or not, Schmitt’s writings made it easier for Hitler to bootstrap his way to dictatorship in Germany. This is hard to ignore, or forgive.

What of Kantorowicz? A disciple of the German poet and mystic Stefan George, he was a German Jew who volunteered for the First World War and fought at the front. After the Allied victory, he returned to join the right-wing *Freikorps* militia. He was personally involved in destroying Polish forces in the Greater Poland Uprising (1918-19) and the general strike in Berlin (1919), known as the *Spartacus*, or *January*, Uprising. Later, he was wounded in street-fighting in Munich while fighting with nationalists against the socialist government (Fleming 2016, 105). Once it became incontrovertible that Nazi racial policy put even assimilated German Jews at risk, he fled Germany in 1938, making first to Oxford for a short interlude, and eventually to the University of California, Berkley, and finally, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton.

In mitigation, it need hardly be added that the virtues of an idea, or argument, bear no necessary correlation with the virtue, or want of virtue, of the

begetter. It is perfectly consistent to deplore the brutal, personal histories of Schmitt and Kantorowicz, while allowing for their respective accounts that metaphysics, secular law, and politics are worthy of reconsideration. This is the position adopted in the present study.

4. The True Exceptionalism of Achieved Celebrity

If this line of reasoning is itself to be held to be credible, it requires evidence. A start might be made by considering what metaphysical components, if any, apply to achieved celebrity today. Here at the outset, some of the theoretical working assumptions that obtain in the study of celebrity nowadays merit regard. Despite the end of royal absolutism in the West, and the associated condemnation of the doctrine of the King's Two Bodies, the cultural capital of achieved celebrity would not remotely have its grasp over the consciousness of commercial investors or the public unless it commanded assumptions regarding power, authority, and the metaphysical notion of autonomous motion.

Prima facie, this may appear to be a large claim. So, it rewards us to list a few of the propositions conventionally made about achieved celebrity in the academic literature before going on to give concrete examples of the metaphysical dimension in achieved celebrity.

Achieved celebrities today have been proclaimed to be “intercessionary figures, gods in human form whose presence spans and translates between two worlds” (Frow 1998, 202). It is considered unremarkable to describe them as “objects of worship” who “mediate between internal and external reality” (Alexander 2010, 325). Theoretically, all of this suggests a deep homology between achieved celebrities and the sacred. The connection of achieved celebrity with the sacred accounts for the popular associations it has with autonomous motion and transcendence.

Strictly speaking, there is nothing exactly new in the proposition that achieved celebrity and the sacred are connected. Morin suggested that the celestial position of ‘the stars’ in modern culture owes something to the popular perception that achieved celebrities possess super-natural, or quasi-super-natural, powers (Morin 2005, original 1957). Therefore, the idea has been around for over half a century.

Notwithstanding this, there are many sceptics. The objections are predictable. If celebrity is analogous to, or presumptive of, the sacred, what set of religious or metaphysical beliefs and institutions is at issue: Pagan, Animist, Christian, Muslim, etc.? Is it not more persuasive to analyze the influence of achieved celebrity by making excursions into economics and politics rather than into religion or metaphysics, i.e., by investigating the commercial and political strings attached to achieved celebrity?

Nathalie Heinich has perhaps presented the strongest articulation of this point of view. She dismisses the notions that celebrity culture entails both religious connections of recognition and belonging, and Christian motifs of extinction and ascent (Heinich 2014, 73). Instead, she regards celebrity to be a commodity, plain and simple, and the processes of celebrity elevation in public consciousness to be a matter of commodification, which has nothing to do with sanctification or metaphysical powers. By way of hard evidence, she cites Halpern's proposition that the 'enthronement procedures' of a celebrity on the Hollywood Walk of Fame is analogous to the procedures of beatification in the Catholic Church, (Halpern 2007, Heinich 2014, 76). For Heinich, Halpern does not compare like with like and, therefore, his proposition cannot carry. In Heinich's view, the 'crucial' ball that he drops is that Hollywood enthrone procedures are entirely 'civil' in substance. Conversely, the Vatican's conferment of beatification is wholly religious, i.e., it refers to the judgement that an act (or acts) made by a mortal is of sufficient super-normative magnitude as to be classified as 'saintly' and, *ipso facto*, related to God.

This will not do. Heinich may be right to object to the validity of Halpern's comparison between the procedures of Hollywood and the Vatican. They are indeed not the same. However, her exercise in analytical cheese-slicing separates celebrity off from any religious nexus. She serves it up as entirely a matter of civil society and commodification. Equally, she dishes up religion on a plate that has no place for politics or commodification. The difficulty with this is that it implies a polarization between civil society and metaphysics that Schmitt (1985, 2005) and Kantorowicz (1957) have already, convincingly rejected.

Polarization is fundamentally a false conceptual dichotomy. Thus, it is a common criticism of the 26 year pontificate of Pope Jean Paul II that the Vatican fell to a multiplier effect, with respect to the rate of beatifications. Between 1592 and 1978, the Church approved 269 beatifications (Barro, McCleary and McQuoid 2011). In the course of Pope John Paul II's papacy, 319 beatifications were authorized. Pope Benedict XVI continued this inflationary trend. In the first four years of his papacy, 52 beatifications were approved (Barro, McCleary, and McQuoid 2011). It is not credible to regard this inflationary surge to be the product of purely religious considerations. What possible religious reasons can explain why John Paul II beatified more people in the course of his papacy than the previous 400 years combined? In a market for religious conversion, where secularization and other religions, especially in Africa and Latin America, are competing with the Catholic Church, beatification is recognized as an evangelical tool, attracting people to Christ. The hypothesis must be that market pressures have adulterated the holy virtues and Catholic procedures of beatification. In other words, the Vatican has used beatification as a handy marketing device against the competition of secularization and rival religions, such as Islam, especially in Latin America and Africa.

Another example of the implausibility of the thesis that polarization pertains to both matters of civil society and metaphysics, in the ontology and social exchange of achieved celebrity, is supplied by moral panics against the idolatry of the star's body. Say what you will, there is strong support in the literature for the notion that a confluence 'between finite and infinite forces,' and a ready accumulation of religious symbolism, mounts-up around the body of the highest achieved celebrities (Celeste 2005, 33; Williams 2009, 41). It is surely not by chance that, like God, the potent, multi-layered, super-normative and sacred meanings of these figures is reduced to a single word. 'Elvis,' 'Marilyn,' 'Marvin,' 'Dylan,' 'Jagger,' 'Lennon,' 'Kurt,' 'Bowie,' 'Prince,' etc., communicate, at once, distinctive, complex systems of escapist, transcendent beliefs, identity rituals, rites of social inclusion and social exclusion and normative assumptions of social transactions, that have reciprocity with religion. They are doubly escapist in that they transport attention from the trouble-bound present to a path that, in the case of the '60s, was mythical, even in the telling; and they suggest transcendence, i.e., a future beyond the confines of the present and a cohesion with higher, super-normative levels. Achieved celebrities symbolize escapism and transcendence. And what, after all, does religion mean, if not an institution that mobilizes types of meaning and experience that have to do with escapism and transcendence (Kolakowski 1982)? Celebrity culture in its highest form is dramatically presented and understood as 'super-normative.' It uses religious imagery of revelation and magic to aggregate and intensify public narrative fantasies, and it reproduces, in translation, the doctrine of the two bodies in ways that are acceptable to an age which has become, nominally, secular (Lofton 2011). In all of this, the ghost of Henry VIII haunts the estate.

5. Conclusion: Immutable within Time

Unsurprisingly, because of their popular association with autonomous motion and transcendence achieved celebrities have regularly faced moral panic and religious hostility. In respectable society, the main worry has not been so much that achieved celebrities will create a new church; it is that they act as popular idols, drawing energies, loyalties, and financial resources from the established church. In the era of the Silent Film (1895-1927), moral panics against screen idols like Rudolph Valentino, Clara Bow, Louise Brooks, and Theda Bara ranged on the imagery of sexual licence symbolized by their bodies. The latter were seen as escaping and transcending puritan, and respectable, boundaries and engendering the emergence of idolaters (Cohen 2001; Koszarski 2008). These silent film idols were widely thought to possess dangerous metaphysical powers that could wreak magic, and havoc, upon the public and conjure scripts of Godless salvation for the hopeless and the lowly. Subsequent vintages of achieved celebrity generated analogous moral panics and metaphysical, quasi-

religious beliefs. Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Bob Dylan, Marvin Gaye, David Bowie, and Prince have all been examined as, *inter alia*, metaphysical cults and crusaders of new narratives of elevated belonging, sacred icons of new religious sentiments, and beacons of non-Godly salvation (McCann 1988; Marcus 1991; Cowan 2010; Till 2010).

To be strictly balanced, in the case of all of these achieved celebrities it is doubtful if the attribution of genuine religious status holds up. Ultimately, they have not generated a sanctified liturgy, nor are they worshipped as the makers of undisputed miracles.⁸ However, their status in popular culture as idols, with exceptional powers of autonomous motion and transcendence, is much more persuasive. “We’re more popular than Jesus now,” declared John Lennon, in a newspaper interview in 1966. Nowadays, this reads like a classic stoner comment, typical of the outlandish currency of many 60’s pop idols. However, at the time, Lennon’s remark outraged the media and incensed right wing Christian opinion, especially in the Southern states of the US. In it, they saw the hand of the Devil’s work (Sullivan 1987, 317-9). Certain Godless codes of lifestyle practice (‘permissive,’ in the case of Lennon) and orientations to sacred values which were not exactly holy, but nonetheless regarded to be, and practiced, as sacred, made both orthodox religion and secularization look outmoded and irrelevant.

Synthetically, the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies arrogated a triple lock of divine, legislative, and judicial power around the body of the monarch. Today, as befits historically significant forms of ascribed celebrity, certain kinds of power over others are still automatically acknowledged to be at the disposal of the monarch. The separation of the monarch from decisive powers over the church and the state has not eliminated honorific rights from the office. However, compared with the Tudor hierarchy of ascribed celebrity, the triple lock of divine, legislative, and judicial has been broken.

It can be no part of any worthwhile argument to submit that the highest achieved celebrities have pirated these powers and taken them for their own. Their position does not reside upon a divine pretext, nor is it popularly comprehended to possess a serious legislative or judicial reach. Despite this, achieved celebrity is not grasped at all unless it is allowed that the authority and power of the highest achieved celebrities derives from the accepted, strength to ‘decide the exception,’ and invokes the glamorous prospect of autonomous motion in their actions (Schmitt 2005, 36). The cultural importance of celebrity humanitarianism derives precisely from this premise. Under the

⁸ But *contra* Henich, churches have been founded around secular achieved celebrities who are regarded to have miraculous powers and to be transcendent. For example, in 1978, in the city of Rosario, Argentina, the Church of *Iglesia Maradoniana* was founded to worship the Argentinian soccer star, Diego Maradona. The Iglesia is estimated to currently have no less than 80,000 faithful (Moller 2017, 55).

‘demotic turn’ part of the cultural power of achieved celebrity comes from their acknowledged right and responsibility to ‘speak for us’ (Turner 2004, 2009). The popular connection between the highest achieved celebrities and a de-territorialized mass goes very deep. The popular beliefs in autonomous motion and transcendence extend beyond personal biography. The highest achieved celebrities leave an indelible imprint upon the cultural biography of the times. Achieved celebrities are not just people, they are ‘recorded people’ (Castles 2008). Their superior access to, and manipulation of, the media mean that we must think of them as having two bodies, a corrigible biological body and an incorrigible, mediated body. In media society we need to get used to the idea of the posthumous existence of the highest achieved celebrity. This means recognizing the highest achieved celebrities not only as a memory, indexing cultural features of a vanished era, but as a real political and cultural force that exerts influence over the actions of others in the present. The faults of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy devalue official symbols, such as monarchs, prime ministers or presidents. Whatever popular appeal that elections or other events give them tends to be short-lived. In the media spotlight and weighed in the scales of popular interpretation, they are all parts of the discredited, elitist, ‘system.’ In contrast, the highest achieved celebrities have become the unelected representatives of the people. The fact that their actions are formally unaccountable does not impair their effects. In the mediated body of the highest achieved celebrities, the exceptionalism of autonomous motion and transcendence has a tenable, trans-historical significance.

The two bodies of the Tudor King expressed first a biological fact and a relationship with the body politic. The corrigible body dies, as all bodies must. However, the incorrigible body is understood to be “immutable within time” (Greenblat 2009, 64). Like angels and spirits, they span the ages. The two bodies of the highest achieved celebrities have the same quality and same purpose, which is to symbolize continuity in the body politic. The extraordinary, apparently spontaneous, tributes and memorials that follow the death of the highest achieved celebrities suggest a relationship between the star and the body politic which is understood to never die.

A *celebrity supernova* refers to the death of achieved celebrities so central to public consciousness that their biological deaths are widely interpreted to signify the end of a cultural era (Rojek 2012, 1-2). A cliché in a certain kind of (functionalist) sociology is that the individual is an *atom* of society. To extend the analogy, the biological life-term of the highest achieved celebrity is a crystal ball through which one may legitimately hope to survey and understand the entire society and culture of the era and provide a routeway to the future. It is not fortuitous, then, that the death of such a specimen produces waves of mourning and tributes that are not limited to the fan-base, but are culture-wide and unbounded in duration (we still ‘miss’ Elvis, Marilyn, and Marvin). Despite being physically dead, they are palpably present in culture.

One initial, concrete articulation of this is the assembly of ‘spontaneous shrines,’ to commemorate a celebrity supernova (Santino 2001). Fans, and people who would otherwise be bystanders, are caught-up in official, socially inclusive, ceremonial commemorative rituals. It is one thing for the people to leave flowers, messages and other offerings at a site associated with a beloved deceased monarch or political leader. This is what one would expect of a dead figure who symbolizes the official system. But the dead star is often perceived and valued as someone who lived *outside the system* and who represents demotic powers that organized politics and state occasions fail to encapsulate. Frequently, those who leave offerings at spontaneous shrines display scrupulous attention and respect in their choice and positioning of leave-taking items (Graves-Brown and Orange 2017, 122). They are not only leaving markers that pay tribute to a great life, they are suggesting a template through which the life can be understood and its demotic significance measured. Flowers and toys figure prominently, as they do in funeral rituals for a loved one that is directly a member of the kith and kin network. Visual data relating to the spontaneous shrines assembled outside Amy Winehouse’s house in Camden Square, North London (where she died in 2011), were reminiscent of the spontaneous offerings left outside the home of Freddie Mercury, where he died in 1991. They anticipated the spontaneous improvised shrines dedicated to David Bowie, who died in 2016 (the main ones were outside his apartment suite where he died in Lafayette Street, Manhattan and Tunstall Road, Brixton, where he grew up) (Graves-Brown and Orange 2017). The spontaneous shrine is popular and democratic, but simultaneously, it resembles the traditional, religious altar of worship, i.e., the immortal tabernacle of forgiveness and retribution that forms the axis of funeral rights in Orthodox Christian religion. Life dictates that these shrines are eventually taken down and cast aside. Yet outside Amy Winehouse’s house in Camden Square and Bowie’s apartment in Lafayette Street, messages, flowers, and other offerings are still evident.

The biological life of the star is popularly regarded to be just one of their manifestations. In Graham McCann’s phrase from 1988, when the highest achieved celebrity physically dies, what is left is “the body in the library.” In asking why high achieved celebrities such as James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Judy Garland, Billy Holliday, Elvis Presley, John Lennon, etc., are immutable within time, the analogy of the star’s two bodies is inescapable. Technology means that the mediated (incorrigible body) can, theoretically, persist in culture *ad infinitum*. It is not however innocent. Like everything human, it is not free from politically interested, politically determined forces.

The aims of the present paper will have been served if the reader is persuaded that the doctrine of the King’s Two Bodies did not die with the overthrow of Royal absolutism. Its endurance, in greatly translated form today, reprises old questions relating to conglomerations of autonomous motion, metaphysical transcendence, and escapism around the body of celebrity. The troubling ele-

ment in this proposition relates to the survival of a version of the doctrine in a political system of Liberal Plebiscitary Parliamentary Democracy that formally, is based on homogeneous equality. Is it sufficient to regard the highest forms of achieved celebrity as compensations for the failure of liberalism to perpetually deliver what it perpetually promises? Or does the complicity of achieved celebrity, with autonomous motion, metaphysical transcendence and escapism, suggest a deep, under-explored relationship between moral regulation and social conformity? For reasons of space, the exploration of relationships between the posthumous body of the highest achieved celebrities and these forces, must be a matter for future work. What can be claimed here is nothing more than a small lifting of the veil from a subject that I take to be of great interest to the study of celebrity. That is, the attainment by the highest achieved celebrities of a status only accorded to monarch's between the Medieval and Tudor period: immutable within time.

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