In the Limelight and Under the Microscope

Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity

Edited by
SU HOLMES AND DIANE NEGRA
We Love This Trainwreck!

Sacrificing Britney to Save America

ANNA WATKINS FISHER

Honestly, I think we should just trust our president in every decision that he makes, and we should just support that, you know, and be faithful in what happens.

— BRITNEY SPEARS IN AN INTERVIEW FEATURED IN FAHRENHEIT 9/11

We know for a fact that there are weapons 9/11.

— WHITE HOUSE SPOKESMAN ARI FLEISCHER, JANUARY 9, 2003

And so we go to war.

— AVITAL RONELL, STUPIDITY

Introduction

Britney Spears’ cameo in Fahrenheit 9/11, Michael Moore’s scathing 2004 documentary on the War in Iraq, follows a brutal sequence of images: shots of dead and mutilated Iraqi civilians and an extended scene featuring a distraught older Iraqi woman just after the US bombing of her home. The woman’s cries are translated in subtitles, “They have slaughtered us! They have destroyed our houses! … We’re all civilians … We’ve had five funerals because of the bombings … Where are you, God?” The next shot is an abrupt cut to Spears, shown during an interview with CNN wearing a blonde wig and chewing gum. “Do you trust the president?” the off-camera interviewer asks her. “Yes, I do,” she responds sweetly.

That Spears' image would be conjured at the most difficult and graphic moment of the film would seem a highly calculated editing decision on the part of Moore. Why is it that Spears, of all people, is made to "answer to" the extreme violence and destruction brought about by the US occupation of Iraq? In a film loaded with jabs at the Bush administration for failing to produce reasonable justification for a costly and ill-conceived war, why is it Spears' "poor judgment" that gets called into question at this juncture? By featuring her in the film, and at this precise moment, Moore implies that Spears has something to do with the Iraq war — that she is, in some way, to blame.

Everything about Spears' saccharine presence in the interview — the banal naivety of her politics, the insulation suggested by her surroundings, the polite impassivity of her affect — is marshaled in that moment to jolt the spectator into feelings of disgust and alienation for the American cultural present as represented by the female celebrity, a response heightened by the sharp contrast of Spears' apparent privilege and isolation to the desperation and pathos in the streets of Baghdad. Juxtaposed with the desperation of the Iraqi situation, the profanity of her female celebrity — signified in close-ups by her made-up face, low-cut shirt, and gaudy jewelry — is called upon to throw into relief the sanctity of the destruction and lost life in Iraq. Moore re-contextualizes this archival footage of Spears, originally from a network news interview, to produce a formal, and emotional, disjuncture between the scenes in Iraq and the clip of Spears. It appears that Moore's point about the sacredness of human life depends on his portrayal of Spears as a token of abject American imperialism — an association of a once-top-of-her-game pop star to an unsteady US superpower — yoking celebrity femininity to American patriotism as logics conceptually bound by the rubric of failure. He figures the celebrity woman as sign for excess and ignorance in order to sound a warning about what he believes America has become — a nation he implies is as indulgent and uninformed as the celebrities it is obsessed with.

Significantly, Moore's agenda also depends on the spectator identifying with Spears. Asked for her response to the War in Iraq, Spears is figured, however surreally, as the typical American whose unswerving patriotism indexes an American public's initially uncritical support of the war that emboldened

the Bush administration's drastic actions in its post-9/11 governance. As a result, the spectator, who is always understood as the uninformed American citizen by the film's address (and who, like Spears, is portrayed as lacking knowledge about what is "really happening"), is sent back an image that is both caricature and mirror reflection. The film offers a complex bifurcation of Spears as female celebrity and uninformed American citizen. How, we might ask, does a female celebrity like Spears come to be held as symbolically responsible for a war? How is it that Spears' so-called ignorance comes to seem more reprehensible than Bush's "failed intelligence?"

Who is allowed to fail in America and how? To answer this question, this essay will interrogate the curious relationship between the War in Iraq and the War on Britney, two contemporaneous global media "events" that have powerfully drawn together questions of excess and failure in the public sphere over the last decade. Both media sagas have constituted states of "national crisis" that have played out over the last decade and been remarkable for indexing the increasingly fractured identification between the spectator and media event. This essay attempts the ambitious work of trying to think about how these seemingly unrelated media dramas might be understood as co-constitutive in the shaping of public opinion. I argue that within the temporal arc of the war — beginning around the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and reaching its crescendo with the tabloid-fueled vitriol of George W. Bush's final years in office — Britney Spears came under such increasing and persistent attack that by 2007, her very personhood had come to represent a state of deep-seated and deeply displaced cultural conflict. I want to suggest that, as an effigy for everything the US has reviled about its own excess, Spears came to represent the country's "supersized" libidinal and commercial investment in the realm of the "too much," following what was widely perceived to be the abysmal failure of her supposed comeback performance at the 2007 Annual MTV Video Music Awards. In contradistinction to the unyielding harassment Spears faced for her personal and professional setbacks, President Bush, despite low approval ratings, left office in January 2009 to retire comfortably in Crawford, Texas, largely unscathed in the aftermath of having driven the country to a violent and costly war while refusing all along the way to stop and "ask for directions."

During the two terms that Bush held US office, spanning 2001-2009, the American public found itself more and more deeply entrenched in a war of which many did not approve. Beginning in 2003, the public faced nightly televised reminders of its entrenchment with news of unrelenting violence from suicide bombings and roadside attacks and weary talk of troop resurgence and partisan exhaustion. By the time Britney Spears took the VMA stage in September 2007, the civilian death toll in Iraq had surged
upwards of 85,500\(^2\) and US military deaths approached 4,000.\(^4\) It seems that somewhere between the search for "WMDs" and Spears’ subsequent hospitalization for a mental breakdown in early 2008, excess and failure had become cultural watchwords for the United States’ increasingly entrenched status as a superpower in crisis. As the losses continued to mount and their justifications called into question, Americans appeared to take the path of least resistance, changing the channel, and reflexively absorbing in haste a heady mix of glamour and detritus.

With the cozy multimedia merger of "news-to-amuse" with so-called "real news," the media-consuming public has become increasingly confronted by the two-part harmony of entertainment news, with its preference for stumbling young stars and the far-less-entertaining news that the world is going up in flames from global terror and global warming that has come to be referred to as "infotainment." We devoured news of Lindsay Lohan’s latest nightclub bust, Paris Hilton’s vomitous victories in late capitalism, and the "news" that, alas, a newly bald Britney Spears was no longer the American darling, sex-kitten-next-door she once was. In this essay, I want to think through this historical moment to ask how Spears might represent a revealing case study for charting the unraveling of democracy during the Bush era, despite the fact that celebrity culture is often seen as divorced from "real" politics. I am not interested in arguments that would work to maintain a strict separation between the so-called "high" and "low" or promote any kind of essentialist logic though I do recognize that my argument walks a critical tightrope, at times touching on concepts that flirt with essentialism while actively working to avoid any essentializing influence. Instead, I want to take seriously the historical coextension of the rise in infotainment and the War in Iraq to think about how media representations of female celebrity, so often treated as apolitical "filler" slotted in between "real news" stories, come to do profoundly important political work under the guise of seeming trivially. While a scholarly argument claiming a connection between Britney Spears and George W. Bush might appear to some a work of provocation or idiosyncrasy, I would argue that such a knee-jerk response serves only as further evidence of the importance of pursuing such an analysis and the power of hegemonic discourses to cordon off certain media objects from other ones in an effort to foreclose lines of interrogation that might breach unspoken rules about what counts as important and what does not.

The point of this essay is to ask exactly this: why does it seem at first so unthinkable that Britney Spears and George W. Bush might have a direct connection? How is it that these figures are constructed in the public sphere in such a way that makes thinking through their relationship to each other in the cultural field seem so difficult?

This essay will offer a study of Spears’ treatment by the mainstream media during the height of her personal and professional setbacks. It will examine the intensity and substance of the attacks against her — slander about her postpartum weight gain, criticism of her lackluster singing and dancing, and public questioning of her abilities as a single mother — in order to suggest a critical framework as a means of thinking through the gender politics behind the widespread vitriol directed at her and for comparing the relatively low cost ultimately paid by Bush for far more consequential breaches of decorum. If entertainment news can be understood as functioning as a kind of cultural release valve for the political, as René Girard’s important theorization of the surrogate victim might suggest, how has the media’s unprecedented scapegoating of Spears functioned to relieve Bush of political pressure he might otherwise have faced for the Iraq war? As one blogger asks, "What is this shit? Ragging on Britney Spears is the new Bush joke."

In sorting through the train wreckage of this important historical and cultural moment, this essay pays particular attention to the role of TV convergence, or the synergistic blurring of commercial lines between television and digital media outlets (online news sites and blogs). I will also consider the role of digital media in producing instantaneous, uninterrupted, immediate, and anonymous platforms for disciplining Spears for her professional and personal setbacks, while in contrast, relatively little of the public anger over the Iraq war seemed to find a place to stick to Bush.\(^8\) As the rise of digital technologies make possible the endless capture and archiving of visual evidence of mistakes made, comments flooded and dance steps stumbled, it often seems that the work of the mainstream press, and underlying multimedia conglomerates, has become not merely to capture but to produce these failures.\(^9\)

Increasingly, a right to privacy, or the right not to be surveilled (made all the more tenuous by the Bush administration’s introduction of the USA Patriot Act on October 26, 2001), has become a luxury afforded to only the truly powerful, a fact that has exposed the ironic disempowerment of celebrity in tabloid culture. Whereas Spears appears unable to have a

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5. The Iraq Body Count Project (IBC) reports between 78,213 and 85,221 civilians have been killed in the Iraq War and Occupation. "Documented Civilian Deaths from Violence," Iraq Body Count, December 14, 2007.
moment go undocumented and the very fact of her celebrity forces her into public exposure, as Head of State, Bush holds executive power over the public record and retains the high level of protection afforded by his office (though many criticized Bush for overextending this entitlement). Indeed, this essay finds itself faced with a revealing imbalance of documentation representing the failures of Spears versus Bush: she is overexposed while he would seem to be underexposed. So perhaps this essay is not about who gets to fail in America, but rather, who gets away with failing and who is not allowed to forget it.

Infotaining America

The influential rise of “infotainment” over the last ten years (particularly apparent in the American television and digital news coverage of 24-hour-news providers like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC) has provided a dangerous smokescreen for the accountability of US politicians to citizens. In her book blasting the rise of the corporate news network for lowering journalistic standards, Bonnie Anderson describes infotainment as “the intrusion of entertainment into news” brought about by demands for news networks to entice more viewers and to hit higher profit margins.10 “How did television journalism get to a place where showing a singer’s digitalized breast for the umpteenth time is considered more important than informing Americans that the US Capitol was closed due to a toxic emergency...?” she asks.11 Anderson is, of course, referring to Janet Jackson’s infamous “wardrobe malfunction,” also referred to as “Nipplegate,” a telling episode in the age of infotainment that has been characterized as the partial replacement of “real news” with something used to entice wider audiences (goodbye “Watergate,” hello “Nipplegate”). Anderson points to the contemporary media landscape of mega-mergers as producing multimedia conglomerates that promote and thrive on a culture of cross-pollination, described as “an attempt to save money while getting cross promotion by having the separate entities within the corporation work together on projects,”12 that produces commercial juxtapositions that move back and forth between “entertainment” and “news.”

The mainstreaming of tabloid culture has been aided in part by the influence of media convergence. A formal extension of the cross pollination of content Anderson describes, convergence makes content available across diverse media platforms, from TV news shows to entertainment news sites to personal blogs. Convergence culture produces interactions between previously distinct media forms, leading to a proliferation of devices for users to interact with and participate in the circulation of mass media content. According to media scholar Henry Jenkins, convergence culture also has the effect of producing what he calls a “collective intelligence,” that links individuals into collectivities networked by their shared habits of consumption.13 The implications of this kind of “intelligence,” the promises and perils of good and bad intelligences, serves as an important theoretical touchstone for this essay. The phenomenon of media convergence over the past decade has put into place the conditions of possibility for failure to become an inevitable byproduct of discursive proliferation, to use another term that echoes Bush’s primary justification for going to war in Iraq in 2003, despite the fact that no evidence of weapons was found. Convergence culture, effectively the mapping of globalization onto the state of modern media, has the effect of confusing how one processes, and prioritizes information by putting everything everywhere, making an otherwise banal story about Britney’s latest haircut the topic of national debate.

While Anderson writes from the perspective of the former journalist for whom entertainment appears as a kind of parasite “intruding on” serious journalism, I am interested not in whether infotainment is a “good” or “bad” thing but rather the conditions of its emergence and what it has created in the larger cultural landscape. Under the banner of infotainment, so-called “soft news,” as a “feminized” or “degraded” form indexing stories perceived to be overly sentimental in content (entertainment, lifestyle, human interest, celebrity news), comes into direct contact with so-called “hard news,” or “masculinized” news forms committed to topics whose “seriousness” would appear bequeathed by an unchallenged commitment to the absolute value of preserving human life in the face of legal, environmental, and cultural threats to it (politics, economics, crime, war, and disasters). I argue that infotainment’s purported drawing together of what is said to be otherwise two different types of information, entertainment news as soft news and “real news” as hard news, falsely treats them as entities that are diametrically opposed to each other while on the other hand, actively and contradictorily conjuring them as equals in a word like infotainment.

In other words, there is a double discourse at work in infotainment. Interposing entertainment news with so-called “real news” effectively presents the two as gendered foils of each other (the supposed yin and yang of a well-balanced daily news diet). This comingling emerges in a moment of TV convergence, linking television and new media across any number of platforms, so as to suggest that giving the infantilized news-watching public its “dessert” might mean they will more willingly eat their “vegetables.” As Jean Baudrillard compellingly argued about Disneyland in relation to the

11. Ibid., 3.
12. Ibid., 15.
rest of the United States ("Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra"), this rise in the prevalence of entertainment news that stands beside and next to "real news" stories of White House sound bites and political punditry would seem to suggest that there is somehow such a thing as real news in the first place. By playfully indulging viewers in the overblown hyperbole of "fake" or "unbelievable" stories, they suggest that the other stories are both real and wholly credible. Placing the news of Britney Spears' over-the-top nightclub antics up against and adjacent to clips of Bush's public statements arguing a rationale for war based on the presence of weapons of mass destruction implies that they are somehow comparable or equal in the scale of their importance and impact in the realm of public debate. Moreover, their discursive proximity indicates not only the important ways in which soft and hard news mutually structure audience reception but also the extent to which their co-constitutive relationship is constantly under denial, as the thing that is so public that it cannot easily be seen. By presenting moralistic narratives that attack celebrities like Spears for being unfit, unreliable, and uncontrolled, politicians like Bush are seen as being more real, trustworthy, and mastered in their actions, lulling us into a false dichotomy and, against her will, making Britney into Bush's alibi.

Sacrificing Spears

In the spring of 2008, stickers with the words "BRITNEY SPEARS" in black-and-white block text began to cover the East Village of New York City. Slapped across fire hydrants, metro seats, and on the walls of bathroom stalls, they seemed to come out of nowhere, as if a part of a guerilla street protest. Ultimately claimed by a writer as a part of a targeted marketing campaign to sell his new book,¹⁵ the sticker's enigmatic strangeness and utter ubiquity seemed nonetheless to index something urgent and presumably instantly communicable to the public. While an exploitative commodification of the pop star was nothing new, this time "Britney Spears," set against the stark white background, seemed to stand in for some kind of political provocation, as if the very presence of her name had come to replace a radical act of protest.

The uncanny sense one had during this period that Britney Spears had become a cultural placeholder, an ever-present spectral figure standing in for something else happening (or significantly, not happening) in American culture is the central concern of this essay. For what exactly had Britney Spears come to stand, stand in for, and be held accountable? Is it merely by coincidence that the American fascination for celebrity "trainwrecks" (Michael Jackson, Courtney Love, Anna Nicole Smith, and most recently, Tiger Woods, to name but a few) has reached its zenith at a cultural moment so marked by political turmoil, civic impotence, and environmental disillusionment? If the promotion of a culture of celebrity bashing can be taken as a democratizing gesture, a form of "speaking truth to power," that seeks to level the playing field of American citizenship, has celebrity bashing become a dominant form of political engagement in America? And if so, what is it about Britney, in particular, that has produced a rage louder and more powerful than all the rest?

In the wake of the 2007 MTV Video Music Awards, the once-adored Spears — at the time, a recent divorcee and young mother of two — found herself a target of public bitterness most consistently aimed at her post-partum corporeality and identity as a struggling mother.¹⁶ Spears became a timely and convenient target for the American public's growing resentment of the Bush administration's devastating incompetence. The spectacularization of Spears' personal turmoil constituted a chain of repeated, uninterrupted blows in the form of taunting headlines, bad photos, and intrusive speculation that only stopped when in 2008 Spears yielded legal and professional

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16. Public backlash over Spears' performance of motherhood comes at a cultural moment dominated by obsessive celebrity coverage emphasizing the glorification of motherhood in general and the magically disappearing effects of pregnancy on the post-partum celebrity body. In *What a Girl Wants?* Diane Negra describes the fetishization and eroticization of pregnancy across an array of contemporary media forms noting that pregnancy has emerged as a hyper state of transcendent femininity. Negra references Spears' pregnancy to make her point, a contribution that throws into relief the short-lived duration of this fantasy in the case of Spears. Negra writes, "The re-classification of the pregnant body as natural, normal, and healthy has transitioned in recent years to a new physical and ideological exhibitionism that is facilitated by fashion trends such as the belly-baring t-shirt... [for example] pop star Britney Spears' first pregnancy in which the star was photographed wearing a t-shirt that read 'I've Got The Golden Ticket' with a downward arrow pointing to her stomach..." Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants?: Fantasizing the Redemption of Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), 65.
control to her father, Jamie Spears, and re-engaged the rhetoric of self-help through physical fitness and personal salvation securing hard work and family values.17

By what mechanisms did there come to be such a profound breakdown in the way that the public processes and compartmentalizes important distinctions between trivial and critical public knowledge? René Girard’s theorization of sacrifice provides this article with its major theoretical grounding. Girard writes,

"Violence is frequently called irrational. It has its reasons, however, and can marshal some rather convincing ones when the need arises. Yet these reasons cannot be taken seriously, no matter how valid they may appear. Violence itself will discard them if the initial object remains persistently out of reach and continues to provoke hostility. When unappeased, violence seeks and always finds a surrogate victim. The creature that excited its fury is abruptly replaced by another, chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand."18

Girard’s theory of the surrogate victim suggests the mimetic correspondence between the War on Britney and the War in Iraq as organized by a logic of sacrifice as that which works to sustain the dominant order at the expense of a more vulnerable position. His theory suggests the function of comparison for understanding the application of one representational paradigm of violence for another ("...nothing resembles an angry cat or man so much as another angry cat or man").19 I argue that Spears’ personal failure was such an attractive sacrificial substitute20 for Bush’s diplomatic failure for the less immediately striking resonances that her personal narrative shared with his, Spears as the Louisiana “country bumpkin” and Bush the Texas “good ole boy.”21 The two have in common a selective

activation of their “Southernness” in the national imagination: Spears as the white-trash pageant queen and Bush as the blue-blooded cowboy. In this sense, Spears’ white trash mythology depends on Bush. Set against his family money and political connections, Spears’ rise to fame from a low-income background is precisely what makes her “white trash.”22

Spears and Bush have in common a rise to meteoric heights of global recognition on the strength of an anti-intellectual backlash in American culture and politics in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Both have walked the line between a fame based on the desire to see the everyday succeed and the desire to watch the everyday fail utterly. They have both acted the part of the “idiot savant” in the “American sitcom,” with high jinks ensuing as their inevitable failure to assimilate to their respective statures plays out. These sagas unfold via daily news clips, composing a patchy “reality TV” plotline. They are rendered all the more compelling by the appearance of “darker forces” behind their ostensibly naïve achievements. Indeed, Karl Rove, Bush’s Senior Advisor and Deputy Chief of Staff, was widely characterized as the mastermind behind Bush’s presidency, as was Vice President Dick Cheney. For Britney, however, the menacing shadows of bad managers, loser husbands, and creepy boyfriends raised many more eyebrows than the white-collar intrigue of the Bush administration.23

It is, however, the ways in which Spears and Bush are not comparable that is most revealing of the inequity of their treatment. Indeed, the public treatment of Spears and Bush during this period suggests a profound gender inequality at work in the affective economies of the mainstream press, increasingly characterized by a feverish moralizing discourse bestowing Manichean portraits of guilt, empathy, and cruelty in the commodity form of gossipy video bites played out in the endless loop of a news cycle that requires the camera remains “always on” its celebrity object. The high-profile stakes of good personal and professional management — who and what gets to be well managed, what a national figure can look like under bad managerial light, and when the demands of celebrity become altogether too unmanageable — came into view during this time period, as did the epic failure of FEMA under the Bush Administration during Hurricane Katrina. In reading the treatment of Spears in contrast to Bush in the 2000s, the complex dynamics of class call out for finer distinctions to be made in public discourse between

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17. Spears’ father assuming control of her estate underscores the realignment of the cultural order in the narrative of Spears’ breakdown and the cultural desire for restored patriarchy authority. Her return to “health” (represented in the media as a return to exercise) would seem to reinforce what Shelley Cobb has called the “role of father-savior in the narrative of her downfall.” Cobb writes, “Jamie Spears was hardly seen as an element in his daughter Britney’s life until January of 2008 when he became conservator of his mentally ill daughter’s life and estate...” 18. René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (London: Continuum, 2005), 2.

19. Ibid.

20. This idea that Spears has become a sacrificial lamb is one that has been expressed in popular culture. The animation comedy short South Park dedicated an episode, “Brutney’s New Look” on March 19, 2008, to a storyline that saw the South Park community band together with the paparazzi to offer Britney Spears up for ritual human sacrifice, by photographing her to death, in order to ensure a good corn harvest.

"new money" and "old money," as well as these categories' relationship to race and geography, as shades of white supremacy get read differently in the respective narratives of Spears and Bush.

**We Love It, We Live For It, and We're Burning In Hell For It**

I imagine most retain a mental picture of Britney Spears as she first emerged — the sublime virgin/whore, child/woman, goddess/mortal whose siren songs sang out with perfect contradiction. In her school uniform she called out, "Hit me baby one more time" and later "I'm not a girl, not yet a woman." Spears' success was founded not on her vocal or dancing abilities but rather her seamless embodiment of a constant state of flux, or the erotic possibilities of a youth that is always already in bloom. Spears also seemed to embody the very impossibility of such an interstitial fantasy space — where one can almost touch a fresh-faced child-angel with the body of a lusty red-leather-clad dominatrix (as we see Spears in the video for her single "Oops! I Did It Again!"). Spears appeared effortlessly to glide down and in between poles of otherness and reality, the naiveté and naughtiness, adolescence and maturity. Her pop princess persona not only operated within conventional discourses of race, class, beauty, desire, and embodiment but *thrive*d on them and, in turn, she was adored for it.

One almost cannot talk about the birth of Britney into the American consciousness, without talking about MTV. The network was Spears' per- formative playground, hosting her at its 2000 *Video Music Awards* where she gave what, as one TV critic writes, "everyone remembers as her big bow." Spears celebrated a new millennium with her own pantoing version of the Rolling Stones’ "(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction" — performed in black suit and matching fedora — before tearing away her clothes to her lip-synced hit "Oops!...I Did It Again," to reveal a sparsely sequined, flesh-colored body suit. Her striptease announced to the world that Britney was no longer the schoolgirl-next-door of the "...Baby One More Time" video, but rather a sexually superlative, adult woman. At the performance's end, VMA co-host Marlon Wayans proclaimed, "Girl done went from The Mickey Mouse Club to the strip club!" The performance earned Spears a standing ovation.

Seven years, one annulled marriage, one divorce, two children, and what seemed like a lifetime's worth of scandal and intrigue later, MTV became the talk of the country when it invited Spears to perform again at its 2007 *Video Music Awards*. After more than a year of a paparazzi-chronicled personal downward spiral that included a scalp-shawing breakdown, multiple trips to rehab, ongoing visits from the department of child welfare, and a befuddling amount of tabloid genital exposure, this performance was expected to serve as Spears' big comeback and became a topic of widespread speculation and national anticipation. If the national position on the War in Iraq was ever divided, the position on Spears' "comeback performance" of her latest single "Gimme More" was most definitely not. Entertainment critic Rebecca Traister pretty much sums up the rest:

 Spears' performance was execrable. Dressed in an unflattering sparkly bikini, Spears stumbled, wobbled, looked disoriented and confused; she barely moved through much of the routine, stepping tentatively around the stage while the dancers around her flipped and twirled. She couldn't remember the words to the song to which she was lip-syncing and eventually stopped trying to even pretend to recognize them.26

A review posted the night of the show on CNN.com carried a similarly strong message, "One woman dressed in a low-plunging floral gown did manage to eke out a few words. They were not nice. 'Britney looks like a hot, sweaty mess,' she declared, 'Look at her. She's barely moving.' "27 The *New York Times* review was more restrained: "...no one was prepared for Sunday night's fiasco, in which a listless Ms. Spears teetered through her dance steps and mouthed only occasional words in a wan attempt to lip-sync her new single..."28 Spliced into the live performance, MTV's cameras panned to VMA guests staring in disbelief. Afterwards, the show's host comedian Sarah Silverman took the stage to deliver a very low blow, identifying Spears as a 25-year-old who has "already accomplished everything she's going to accomplish in her life," calling her two young sons "the most adorable mistakes you will ever see," and imitating what Spears' much-photographed "hairless vagina" looks like by pulling her lips together sideways. Traister goes on,

It was spectacularly painful, mostly because it violated one of the rules of dirty mean comedy: You don't sharpen your talons on the weak. Imagine Spears having come off a stage where she had been invited to humiliate herself only to hear a crowd roar in whooping, derisive appreciation for the woman narrating her breakdown. But then, imagine Spears accepting the invitation to her latest public self-immolation and then obligingly lighting the match.29

29. Traister.
The utter failure of Spears’ performance — “evidenced” by her glazed and listless countenance, protruding stomach, and tentative choreography — may have been most terrifying because it effectively collapsed all of the smoke and mirrors previously in place around her artfully crafted, formerly young and sculpted self. Her glazed and disinterested expression exposed the feigning of youthful euphoria, a requirement of the kind of celebrity Spears had attained. Spears’ forte had always been the quality of her package, as the “packaged-ness” of her musical product had long been accepted, even celebrated, as such. Those previous news-making appearances that had received so much praise were suddenly thrown into stark relief against a far less-carefully executed and meticulously planned spectacle.

Maybe the fallout following Spears’ performance would not have been so shaming if the digital age did not boast such seductive anonymity and instantaneous gratification for lacerating the ever-deserving Other. Following the genealogy elaborated by Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish, it comes as no surprise that the body that was once a direct instrument or intermediary of punishment comes under a more indirect, semiotic kind of torture in the digital age — public exhibition, pillory, flogging, branding — that is no less extreme for its virtual proximity to the sovereign. 30 It should also come as no surprise that baiting Britney has become a profitable online industry. With an increasing smack of “sado-entertainment,” online posts convulse with pure pleasure: one person writes, “I love this trainwreck!”31 and another, “We LOVE this mess!”32

The self-described “Queen of All Media” Perez Hilton of the eponymous perezhilton.com has sought fame in his own right promoting “Celebrity juice, not from concentrate” on his “hilarious” blog. Hilton’s blog would seem exemplary for the way that new media markets continue to produce new and diverse channels for celebrity consumption by perverting paradigms of fan culture. One recalls Bonnie Anderson’s allusion to entertainment news as a form of parasite “intruding on” serious news. Rather than refute someone like Anderson, Hilton and countless other bloggers capitalize on the association of entertainment with unseemliness or bad taste to cash in on an industry of tabloid bottom-feeding. Hilton’s treatment of Spears’ VMA meltdowns, of course, thoroughly documented on his site — replete with wallpaper advertising his latest success at the time — a new TV show on VH1 called “What Perez Sez” with the tagline “We love it. We live for it.

We’re burning in hell.” Bloggers like Hilton posit a “no holds barred” take on celebrity culture that has found a lucrative commercial formula in lashing out at celebrities, spectacularizing the reversal of the treatment of the star as beyond the realm of the mere mortal to popularize an Industry of Mean. His blog archives the pleasure he visibly takes in recasting celebrity in a negative relation instead of a positive, privileging the bad over the good, the minor car accident over the academy award, the Sunday afternoon fashion misstep over the red carpet entrance.

Perez’s post-VMA page, filed under “Icky Icky Poo > Britney Spears . . . In Case You Missed It . . .” is an “Open letter to Britney Spears” (see Figure 14.2). Following a pair of photographs of bikini-clad Spears during her VMA performance with the words “You Suck” scratched across in a childlike doodle, the letter reads:

Dear Britney,

Fuck you! FUCK YOU!!!!!!!! We are insulted, offended and disgusted by your “performance” at the VMAs. Are you fucking serious??? What you did was disrespectful to your few remaining fans. And it was disrespectful to MTV! You didn’t even try!!!! You should have just cancelled, bitch. Your performance was beyond pathetic. The old Britney Spears, who was at one point (a long time ago) truly great, would be embarrassed by your lack of professionalism and utterly shiteous appearance at the VMAs...You seemed dead onstage. You have lost that spark and shine that used to ooze out of you! We all know you lipsynch, but you couldn’t even do that well at the VMAs! And you barely danced! You couldn’t even get good hair extensions???????? You have no one to blame for your failure but YOU! There was no way you were going to be good. You were out partying every night before the VMAs for three days in a row until almost sunrise! You were probably still drunk or high during your performance!!! You almost tripped a few times, you fucking mess!!!!!!! No bullshit excuse that you or your camp will come up with can make up for how pathetic your performance was. You heard Sarah Silverman was going to make fun of your kids and it upset you? Deal with it! Rise above it! Or don’t go on! A true professional will DELIVER - no matter what!!!! Let’s repeat that. It’s worth repeating. A true professional will deliver - NO MATTER WHAT!!!!!!!!!!! What you did was inexcusable!...You should apologize to everyone, Britney!!!! You are pathetic! FUCK YOU!

xoxo

Perez

P.S. Your beer belly looked hot!

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This open letter — accompanied by a sidebar advertising “T-shirts Worth Dying/Killing For” emblazoned with a caricature of a bald Britney Spears over the word “TRAINWRECK” — was a gross example of exactly how much malicious satisfaction Americans seemed to take in Spears’ disgrace. In a dramatic display of the energetic participation of the postfeminist “gay guru” in the rigorous policing of normative femininity, Hilton licked his lips with sadistic satisfaction at her expense, mocking Spears “beer belly” and repeatedly screaming “FUCK YOU!!” But lest we forget, Hilton, whose real name is Mario Armando Lavandeira, was also performing his own marketable brand of disturbed queer hysteria and lapping up the voyeuristic returns on his ecstatic, misogynist output. Sites like Perezhilton.com appear to try to upstage, even as they claim moral superiority over, the excessiveness of the celebrity antics they hunt for profit. Harvey Levin, managing editor of tmz.com has said that when it comes to online traffic, “Britney is Old Faithful.”34 Levin added that page views spike when an item about Spears appeared on the site, which heaped daily ridicule on the comings and goings of Spears, mimicking her accent, parenting abilities, and wardrobe choices. As more ridicule produces more interest, excessive negative attention paid to Spears became a self-perpetuating cycle normalized and condoned by commercial logics of supply-and-demand. Digital media offer the privileged conduit for these sites, not simply in terms of speed of access but also in facilitating an archive of failure that offers limitless permutations in production and manipulation of content.

What ideological work does the Industry of Mean do? How might a website like Hilton’s be read as emblematic of how a sense of “anti-establishment” or “queer” community gets leveraged around mainstream moral codes of conduct and social mores to do a dangerous kind of work? How do potential political alliances between gay men and straight women get wrecked apart and re-fitted to support the policing of patriarchal norms? How might sites like Hilton’s, that appear to promise a certain kind of liberation from the false consciousness of Hollywood worship, be read as, in fact, profoundly conservative — serving to discipline not so much the stars they claim to attack but rather a readership that absorbs the moralistic lessons of good taste and good citizenship offered up by the mocking of a few choice targets? What should we make of the “professional amateur” blogger who performs his manic public critique in the name of codes of proper self-compartment, professionalism, and respect? What are we to make of the political resonance of Hilton’s dogmatism with the violence of the Bush doctrine, as rhetorical systems that operate by representing themselves as divined by their exclusive access to a higher plane of principle irregardless of the feelings or beliefs of others? The entitlement of the masculine exceptionalism that underwrites the agendas of both Hilton and Bush draws a straight line connecting the logics of highly influential media sources like perezhilton.com to those of Fox News and other channels widely cited for the mainstreaming of conservative rhetoric.

A regular presence on reality programs on channels like VH1 and entertainment news programs like Extra, Hilton is also a frequent guest on talk shows like the The View. Far from being an outsider to the mainstream media, Perez Hilton is a well-connected and well-rewarded representative of a greater network of financial success that depends on commodifying the failure of Spears and celebrities like her. By claiming the transgressive position of outsider gay Latino blogger engaging in target practice with Hollywood celebrities who are “fair game,” Perez Hilton, in fact, activates his own insider access to the very spheres he would seem to call out for being corrupt, fashioning his own name after Paris Hilton as more of an act of homage than parody. Hilton gives us anti-endorsements that nevertheless function as endorsements, engaging us in the activity of consuming the latest Hollywood product.

Fall of an Empire: The State of Becoming Unfit

The very real influence of Perez Hilton’s hysterical cultural performance becomes apparent as one peruses MTV’s 2007 VMA website, where the unbridled rage projected at Britney Spears in post after message board post begins to subsume all notions of conventional sanity and plain good sense. The ubiquity of Hilton-derived rhetoric (in tone and style) is stunning, as anonymous viewers of MTV adeptly, if unconsciously, impersonate Hilton, and I argue, not the other way around. “Dancing_freak31” writes, “BRITNEY SUXX!!! WHEN I WAS LITTLE I USED TO LOVE BRITNEY BUT NOW SHE'S SUCH A WHORE.”35 “JazzyPha22” echoes this sentiment writing, “BRITNEY SUCKS, WHAT HAPPENED TO THE OLD BRIT, SHE'S JUST SOOOO DIRTY?”36 While these are the kinds of contributions to discourse that often get left aside by intellectual debate, and for good reason, I would argue that what makes these kinds of posts most compelling is that they could have been written by anyone, thus making them the voice of everyone. What is also fascinating about these posts, demonstrating as they do a nasty other side to fan culture, is their mutually drawn conclusion that Britney not only “sucks” but “sucks” because she was been found to be a degraded woman in the duration of her onstage performance, deemed a “whore” who is “just so dirty.” Having reached this conclusion, both “Dancing_freak31” and “JazzyPha22” gesture toward their melancholic desire to return to a past

35. Here I am quoting a message board post by “JazzyPha22” from December 11, 2007, at 00:00, “Gimme More (Live),” MTV, December 12, 2007.
moment, a moment that is profoundly and traumatically lost where Britney was, to them, someone else entirely. "Dancing_freak31" writes "When I was little I used to love Britney." And yet, "now she's a whore."

I am struck by the semantic strangeness of the insistence on "whore" here. What is it about Britney's lackadaisical dancing and tentative lip-syncing that renders her somehow unanimously legible as a "whore"? Has the contemporary use of the word become a banner to cover any feminine "sin"? Was it merely her costuming that earned it — ill-fitting bra and underwear, fishnets, and high-heeled boots? Yet, if so, how was this costume any different than the even more scanty attire the American public has witnessed on (or perhaps off) Spears in the past? Why would her libidinal performance have suddenly leapt into the realm of sex work? Of course, there was no actual sex act performed on stage. In fact, there was far less indication of sex than in performances past in which Spears had ripped off her clothes, groped and gyrated with reckless abandon, and made out with her mentor Madonna.66 Lest we forget Britney was most heavily criticized for sexually underperforming, under-delivering (dazed appearance and lethargic dancing) on expectations of the sexual spectacle she became famous for, and not for her "overactivity," as claims of literal promiscuity in "whore" would seem to denote.

Perhaps it was the very recognition of her glazed-over appearance that pricked the puritanical American subconscious with the flickering association of the prostitute imagined as oversexed and yet barely present enough to register her own blasphemous indecency. However, I postulate something else entirely. Britney Spears was called a "dirty whore" not because of her lack of clothing, her disinvested expression, her sexual over-activity or inactivity, but rather because to be a whore is to be a failed woman. "Whore" has become such a far-reaching epithet for women read as excessive or failing because the term equates a certain attitude toward sexualized female bodies deemed less than desirable, even as they reach and register complex and nuanced forms of desire hidden under layers of repulsion and pity. The whore is also the "working girl" who is not quite professional. In other words, the whore registers as the amateur — she is the less-than-talented actress who must audition on the casting couch, the woman who cannot find remunerated, respectable work and is thus relegated to its margins. The whore lacks any distinction between her sexual and professional life and wears that lack on her body as excess. Britney's excess spills out of her once-sleek costume and is worn on her undisciplined, post-prime, post-partum frame.

"What happened to the old Brit?..." "JazzyPha22" wants to know. What happened to the Britney whose superhuman physical discipline marked her highly sexualized performances with the consummate professionalism of a seasoned performer? At this juncture, it seems the notion of a "real Britney" is less compelling than that of many and interchangeable Britneys — ones we love, ones we hate, new ones, old ones, classic ones, and disposable ones. The revolving door of Britneys cycle in and out of our collective mind's eye, day in and day out — spectacularized by a rainbow of wigs and hair extensions, a chronicle of weight gain and weight loss, and the frantic and fluctuating wardrobe of Us Weekly's Worst Dressed Celebrity two years running. The effect is one of a cartooning of a human being and is what makes possible the destruction of the stakes of her material embodiment.

In June 2006 — more than a year prior to her notorious VMA performance — Britney Spears gave a rare and candid interview to Today Show personality Matt Lauer on Dateline NBC. In the interview she discusses the state of her (soon-to-end) marriage to Kevin Federline, whom she describes as "awesome" adding, "He helps me. He has to. I'm (an) emotional wreck right now." Lauer asks Spears why she is choosing to speak out. She responds that the tabloids have "gone too far" and are intruding on her private moments by taking photographs of her on her private property. Spears says, "They've crossed the line a little bit...they like to have the person they pick on, I feel like I'm a target." Spears responds to questions about her portrayal by the media as a negligent mother, from an incident where she was photographed driving with her son, Sean Preston, on her lap to a series of images that show Spears nearly dropping the boy after stumbling in a New York City street (a spectacle made all the more desperate by reports of Spears crying alone in a fast food restaurant later that day). Spears says, "I can't go anywhere without someone judging me...I did it with my dad. I'd sit on his lap and I drive. We're country[folk]." Significantly, Spears' abjection comes to be deeply intertwined with class politics — the puncturing of her public persona as glamorous and disciplined producing sharp critiques of her ability to parent, as poor or working-class women are often targeted as bad mothers. As Shelley Cobb has noted, in being called a bad mother (much in the way that her mother, Lynne Spears, has) it was as if Spears "couldn't achieve the balance that middle-class motherhood prizes."67 When asked if she was upset by the headlines that ensued, questioning her parental judgment, Spears defends herself: "I know I'm a good mom."68

This interview quickly became a hot topic for bloggers and satirists alike. A foreboding precursor to her VMA fall-out, once again the question became — "What is she thinking?" The Washington Post ran a particularly vicious editorial in its "Fashion" pages. A caption under an unflattering photo of Spears during the interview reads, "In her Dateline interview last week, the

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36. At the 2003 Video Music Awards, Britney Spears made waves opening the show in a performance with Madonna that culminated in a kiss between the two women (the performance also featured Christina Aguilera, who is often elided in accounts of it).

37. Cobb, 4.

ill-clad Britney Spears was merely a shadow of her former hotness. 39 In the article that follows, writer Robin Givhan eviscerates Spears for her low class, bad taste, and shameful sense of style in an article entitled “Oops Again and Again: Britney Dresses for a Backyard Pity Party”:

Pregnancy cleavage can be a beautiful development, but serving up one’s bosom like melons at a picnic is aggressively self-indulgent, enormously distracting and, unless you’re auditioning for a spread in Penthouse, unnecessarily vulgar.

Spears fidgeted, blathered and wept through the interview last week and one couldn’t help but gape in amazement at her astonishing aesthetic meltdown. It’s hard to recall the last time someone as famous as Spears — without any accompanying substance-abuse rumors — appeared so startlingly, slovenly wretched. The pop singer’s golden glow of stardom had been dimming, but this was the moment when it dropped below the horizon. 40

Interested in the meltdown as an aesthetic rather than emotional event, the article blasts Spears’ personhood at the level of her wardrobe — enumerating her “poor choices” and pointing to her “miniskirt and sheer babycard top” to suggest, in fact, insist, that Spears ultimately is “getting what she deserves” for looking like a teenager or “like a stereotypical hick — and wretchedly vulnerable.” Of course, Spears had worn such outfits before without criticism, as it was her image that changed, not her taste. Givhan writes with moralizing zeal, “They were not the sexy clothes of a confident woman defending herself or standing up for her man. They weren’t the teasingly body-conscious attire favored by pregnant women who proudly show off their bellies.” 41 Givhan mobilizes an empty feminist rhetoric in order to secure a soapbox from which to make declarations about what she believes constitutes “dignified female comportment” that discipline Spears based on her style squeamishness. Givhan is profoundly, and merely, moved by Spears’ failure to wear her motherhood correctly — to choose and wear the appropriate archetypical costuming of the supportive, doting wife or the virginal young mother. Givhan’s criticism of Spears’ aesthetic confuses “the sexy clothes of a confident woman” with the glamorous costuming of a woman who has people working for her to create an upper-class illusion of postfeminist autonomy.

Givhan’s point seems to be that were Spears to just try a little harder, to have just a little more “self respect,” to present herself with more discipline and sophistication, she might not be as wretchedly pathetic; she might deserve a little public dignity. It is Spears’ own failure to get her act together that is the justification given for her continued public flogging. This “victim-blaming” logic is reminiscent of a certain discourse around a “merit-based” occupation of Iraq that emerged in mid-2007 when Republican senators submitted a proposal for US troop withdrawal based on the performance of the Iraqi government that was ultimately rejected by a Senate vote of 67–29. One New York Times article reported, “That second proposal, by Senator John Warner, Republican of Virginia, would require Mr. Bush to report to Congress in mid-July and mid-September on how well the Iraqi government was performing against a set of benchmarks. Foreign aid could be withheld for lack of progress.” 42

I bracket this connection to gesture to an American cultural logic that would simultaneously hold Iraq accountable for the violence and chaos resulting from the 2003 US invasion and subsequent occupation, and hold Britney Spears accountable for her failure to rebound from a constant barrage of ridicule from the American public. What is significant here is how the obsession with “evidence” of good taste or the ability to make “good choices” comes to be linked to how the American public alternately confers and withholds empathy. In declaring Spears’ “aesthetic meltdown,” Givhan’s not-so-subtle suggestion is that if you dress like “you’re auditioning for a spread in Penthouse,” then you must be auditioning for a spread in Penthouse, and thus you must be an unfit mother. 43 While Spears’ interview with Lauer was ostensibly intended or designed to defend her skills as a parent, her goal was made all the more retrospectively desperate by her subsequent loss of custody of her children to Federline in late 2007, following the aftermath of her VMA blow-up. 44 This sobering blow was reported on Gawker.com, a popular New York-based entertainment blog in a post filed under “Gossip Roundup.” The post teases: “What Has Britney Spears Done Wrong?” then goes on to deadpan, “Revealed! Britney Spears lost her kids by being an incredibly terrible parent. Also, not signing some papers.” 45 OK! Magazine carried the story on its cover with a headline reading “Goodbye Mommy.” According to its representatives, the magazine expected another best-selling issue after a summer cover announcing “Britney’s Meltdown” sold 1.2 million

40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
43. Givhan’s argument relies on a faulty mimetic logic that suggests that resemblance renders equivalence: if you look like a whore, then you are a whore. Pierre Macherey offers a way of thinking around this problem to understand how things may be similar without being the same, “…the relationship between the mirror and what it reflects…is partial: the mirror selects, it does not reflect everything. The selection itself is not fortuitous, it is symptomatic…” In other words, I would suggest that while Spears’ attire might be argued to suggest or be symptomatic of her degradation, it cannot be treated as the direct reproduction or very source of her degradation, as Givhan suggests. Pierre Macherey, “Lenin, Critic of Tolstoy,” in A Theory of Literary Production (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), 135.
copies (compared to average sales of around 930,000). 46

In her essay "Moms Don’t Rock: The Popular Demonization of Courtney Love," Norma Coates writes of a 1995 interview Barbara Walters conducted with Love, presenting an astounding moment of cultural déjà vu with respect to Lauer’s interview with Spears:

In her interview . . . Love looked like the “trainwreck” that Walters described. Although clad in beige Armani, with her normally disheveled hair put up in a fairly neat bun, Love presented a vision of disorder and chaos. Her trademark slut-red lipstick looking like a smear across the lower section of her face, Love cried, smoked, managed to make Barbara Walters say “suck,” and otherwise acted like a woman out of control. The climax of the interview came when Walters asked the question that everyone was waiting for: “Are you a good mother?” Love answered, “Yes, yes, yes.” 47

Like Love, Spears is represented as the “trainwreck” mother whose tragic relationships, substance abuse and/or psychological issues must be surveilled by a suspicious American viewing public. This phenomenon has the effect of aligning the cultural regime of family values with tabloid commercial interests. Coates writes of Love, “The question of her fitness to mother lurks just beneath the surface, when it does not emerge openly, in mainstream representations of Love; it is the source of the media’s fascination with her.” 48 The mainstream media’s panoptic relationship to Spears suggests an even deeper fascination with the way in which her motherhood (her maternal “fit-ness”) has been worn and continues to wear on her face and body (her sexual “fitness”). Britney Spears’ public image is once again, but differently this time, caught between two poles of impossibility. Far from stuck in the provocative and profitable purgatory of her girliness, Spears is caught between her role as a young divorcee and mother of two toddlers and her role as the once-and-just-maybe-once-again American sexpot. She embodies the fierce and frustrated impossibility of two roles believed by the American public to be fundamentally incompatible and yet she continues to receive intense pressure, on both ends, to surmount their impossibility. Her unthinkable desire to be both sexual and maternal is constantly being policed by her continued public demonization in arguments by so-called “family values” proponents, pseudo-feminists, and a combination of the two. One online post reads:

Tell me she can’t feel that her ASS is hanging out. She is a mother. What a slut. Even when I was in my early 20’s and a single mom, I would never have dressed like that. I liked to go out with friends and even get drunk sometimes but, come on lady. What are your kids gonna think of you when their [sic] older. What a skank!

— Message posted by “Melissa” 49

The inevitability of her maternal failures and public meltdowns can be attributed to what has become a national compulsion to force Spears to live up to America’s expectations of itself. If the consummate performer cannot perform the expectations set forth by the American value system, then something would have to be wrong. 50 The American public was fairly unfazed by Spears’ decision to marry and start a family until this came to mean that she had reneged on her implicit contract with the American public to maintain the public persona the country had come to expect from her. By 2007, it had become clear that Spears was no longer able to turn America on with her abs-of-steel performances and be the consummate mother. The American response seemed to be that if Britney wants our empathy, she must earn it by showing us she can be not only the perfect mother figure but also the mother with the perfect figure. It becomes a win/win for the American public: If she succeeds (which she cannot) then she reaffirms our value system and if she fails (when she fails), it will make for one hell of a good show.

Love’s incarnation of the unrefined celebrity mother pilloried by the public illustrates that Spears’ dilemma is not unique. Unlike Love, however, who was always the bad girl, motherhood for Spears appeared a state that violently confounded the virgin/whore dichotomy that her younger self became famous for holding in place. The question is: what does motherhood really represent? Motherhood, for Spears, would seem a two-headed cultural monster inciting attacks on her for being too sexy to be a mother and suggesting, on the other hand, that for being a mother, she can never be sexy. Is such profound hostility toward so-called failing mothers really about a public fear that a child will be put in danger? Is the American public really so up-in-arms because we are worried that Britney’s son, Sean Preston, will fall on his head or will suffer an untimely death in a car accident? Is it emotional pathos that drives an identification with a child whose mother may not “love him

46. Navarro.
48. Ibid., 320.
50. In his November 2007 public debate with Alain Badiou entitled “Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics,” the philosopher Simon Critchley prefixes his remarks with a moment of comic relief in which he makes brief mention of Britney Spears’ “tragic” performance at the VMAs in order to highlight an introductory point about the ineluctable failure of the emblematic liberal figure facing its own limitations. Notably, Spears is invoked at the margins of Critchley’s philosophical remarks, treated as pre-critical fodder rather than as a serious case study for his ultimate argument about the status of political meaning in a present moment he characterizes as one of “military neo-liberalism,” using the term to designate a faith in neoliberal economic policy combined with a metaphysical belief in freedom and human rights that is backed up by military force. “Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance,” Slought Foundation, 15 November, 2007.
enough” the way a “good mother” would? “Mom-ism,” a critique of women that first emerged in post-war America, singles out the mother figure as the cause of many of America’s ills. The trope of motherhood comes to be seen as what somehow “softens or weakens” sons in particular, and American values more broadly. Perhaps Spears’ and Bush’s cultural narratives represent, above all, different sides of the cultural imperative demanding the protection of the son at all cost.

**Failed Intelligence**

Placing Spears in relation to Bush renders visible the systemic incongruities of power when mere money and fame are not enough to buy a certain kind of protection, as the grounds by which public/private distinctions get fundamentally redrawn by gender. Nancy Fraser has usefully articulated the political stakes of the public/private binary, writing that it “enclave(s) certain matters in specialized discursive arenas so as to shield them from general debate . . . This usually works to the advantage of dominant groups and individuals and to the disadvantage of their subordinates.” Fraser’s reading suggests that the dividing line between what gets articulated as public information versus private information is one ordered by the logic of dominance, suggesting an important distinction to be made between the mere stardom of Spears and the sovereignty of Bush.

Around the same time period that those rather curious stickers I discussed earlier began appearing in the spring of 2008, posters advertising VH1’s *I Love the New Millennium* TV show also began appearing around New York City (see Figure 14.3). “Oops! There Goes the Decade” the posters teased, depicting the now-famous image of Spears nearly dropping her young son with George W. Bush’s pouting face superimposed over the baby’s. The poster renders literal what is at stake in a misstep — the protection of the privileged son I alluded to earlier. The poster also renders literal the very representational exchangeability that defines our culture as one violently protective of the son and heir to the patriarchal line. Additionally, this poster illustrates the fundamental paradox of power I am concerned with in this article: how it is that, despite every argument for the contrary (persistent jokes about Spears’ lack of education, poor judgment, and bad taste), Spears comes to be the one held responsible for Bush (literally, responsible for holding Bush) in the collective imagination visualized by this image. Even as Spears is berated for being a terrible mother, she is still regarded as an adult. Bush, however, acknowledged by the poster as being a central figure in a decade of “Oops,” has the role that is, literally, that of a minor. How do we make sense of the extraordinary inequity of this picture, where the so-called leader of the free world could get away with playing the part of the baby?

More than most, Spears’ stardom is one that has been calibrated around the mass marketing of her total exposure — promised by the sexual permissiveness of her panting sexuality and the uncritical earnestness of her blushing sentimentality — and when the tide turned, she was positioned to feel the force of the impact of her own epic, personal mythology and lost innocence. Bush, on the contrary, widely caricatured as the “ne’er-do-well” son of a former US president and inheritor of an American political and oil dynasty, carried through his political career the armor of patrilineal protection, a protective self-enclosure drawing together a tight-knit circle of friends and family of the Bush administration in a far reaching net of cronyism and nepotism. While the long shadow cast by Bush Senior may have given Bush more to prove, it also served to cloak him from the harm of too warm a spotlight. Bush was not forced to keep his promises, because he had little promise and was elected in spite of this.

According to Avital Ronell, stupidity never fails. Ronell writes, “Stupidity never admits to fault or error; it is dependent upon prejudicial entanglements and epistemological illusions. Unlike truth . . . stupidity does not suffer from its own lack . . .” Rather, stupidity is slick. It has a way of getting

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51. In *The Mommy Myth*, Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels have more recently revisited the concept of “Momism” that was initially coined by the journalist Philip Wylie in his 1949 book *Generation of Vipers*. The derogatory term was first used by Wylie to attack women for “being so smothering, overprotective, and invested in their kids, especially their sons, that they turned them into dysfunctional, sniveling weaklings, maternal slaves chained to the apron strings, unable to fight for their country or even stand on their own two feet.” Douglas and Michaels seek to reclaim the term to describe (in “New Momism”) an ideology of motherhood that has snowballed since the 1980s: “a highly romanticized and yet demanding view of motherhood in which the standards for success are impossible to meet.” Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 4.

52. This son is, of course, always a very particular son. Comparative disinterest in thousands of young soldiers and young Iraqi civilians killed or maimed during war suggest the representational logics by which white middle- and upper-middle-class male bodies are protected to the endangerment of working-class persons of color. Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* makes this same point.


54. Ronell, 44.
around things, ducking and weaving around accountabilities of truth and knowledge: “Stupidity exceeds and undercuts materiality, runs loose, wins a few rounds, recedes . . . (it) mutes just about everything that would seek to disturb its impervious hierarchies.” As the head of state, Bush may have been the father of the nation, but he remained merely the stupid son. He was not successful in spite of his stupidity; he was successful because of it. He had access to the tools of the father (language, sovereignty, history, the law), and in not being able to use them, he used them brilliantly. When asked had he made any errors, Bush responded that “not finding weapons of mass destruction was a significant disappointment.” In the rhetoric of a child, Bush described his mistakes in his last press conference before leaving office as “disappointments,” as if to deny culpability to a world beyond himself. Bush steadfastly maintained the rhetoric he had espoused throughout his administration, “I disagree with this assessment that, you know, that people view America in a dim light,” he said. “It may be damaged amongst some of the elite. But people still understand America stands for freedom.”

Also “a huge disappointment” were the abuses found to have been committed by members of the US military at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. In response to questions about accusations by human rights advocates of the White House’s condoning of torture, the president answered defiantly, “All these debates will matter not if there is another attack on the homeland.” He continued, “You remember what it was like right after September the 11th around here? People were saying, ‘How come they didn’t see it? How come they didn’t connect the dots?’ Do you remember what the environment was like in Washington? I do.” Amazingly, it is Bush who believes that he is being sacrificed in the name of his mission to protect America. What he does not see is that the state of exception8 as that he persists in invoking, fundamentally serves to protect him and those like him, a self-protective gesture that staves off failure by refusing to afford it the critical recognition it requires to come into being.

On March 18, 2003, President Bush said, “Intelligence leaves no doubt that Iraq continues to possess and conceal lethal weapons.” And yet, Bush ultimately does not need any intelligence. The ultimate failure to find evidence of there being weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, originally given as his primary justification for going to war, served notice that a higher power than mere process sanctioned Bush’s logic. The “bad intelligence” was quickly smoothed over by a renewed rhetorical fervor that came to define his presidency. As a concession of one’s failures in the eyes of another first requires that one fully recognize what the other is saying, Bush’s success relies on his remaining unilateral.

What was most striking about Spears’ appearance in Michael Moore’s documentary was the association of her problematic ignorance not with President Bush but with the American people (though Bush is scarcely absolved of blame in the film). This intriguing elision of Bush betrays something profound about the way that blame routes around power to isolate what Girard characterized as a surrogate victim “vulnerable and close at hand.” In a film that purports to hold the Bush administration accountable for its failure, Spears appears not as a stand-in for the untouchable public figure but as the female celebrity and unwitting citizen available to resolve the crisis of representation presented by what is described as “the initial object remain[ing] persistently out of reach” in Girard’s analysis. In one of the final scenes in Fahrenheit 9/11, Moore shows Lila Lipscomb, a woman whose son was killed in the Iraq war, as she grieves in front of the White House. In the emotional scene, Lipscomb explains that she needs somewhere to put all of her pain and anger. As the camera follows her, she walks toward the White House only to find an iron gate, a symbol for the barrier that prevents a direct confrontation with power.

The total exposure of the mother figure, as a target for misplaced public hostility, emerges as a means for disciplining breakdowns within the system. I have argued that the visibility of these breakdowns, often in the guise of entertainment, are not in excess of the system but absolutely central to it. The cultural obsession with Britney Spears during this period of national crisis did important political work for redirecting public attention to a spectacle far more within reach. Just as for Baudrillard, Disneyland is presented as an imaginary to make us think everything else is real, Spears was presented as a trainwreck to make the American public think that everything else was under control. In a culture increasingly dominated by infotainment, it has become all the more urgent to recognize the always already established presence of entertainment in news in the first place. Indeed, as infotainment

55. Ibid., 3.
56. Stolberg.
58. The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s reworking of Carl Schmitt’s theory of the sovereign as he who decides on the state of exception has provided a valuable concept for critiquing the Bush Doctrine. Agamben gives the “military order” issued by Bush on November 13, 2001 as an example of what he calls “[the] immediately biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension . . . .” Extending the Patriot Act, the order authorized the “indefinite detention” and trial of non-citizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. Agamben notes that what is new about President Bush’s order is that it has the effect of radically erasing the legal status, and thus legal rights, of the individual held, making them neither prisoner nor person accused, but rather “detainee.” Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 1, 3.
60. One cannot help but also think of Cindy Sheehan, who has been the most visible grieving mother to be associated with the war. After the death of her son in Iraq, Sheehan attracted national and international media attention in August 2005 for her extended anti-war protest at a makeshift camp outside George W. Bush’s Texas ranch.
has been criticized as “dumbing down” the public, one cannot help but ask how much good intelligence has done us anyway.

Conclusion

This essay has attempted to systematically deconstruct the logics by which Britney Spears’ personal struggles over the last decade came to be portrayed as so culturally important, so deeply ideological, that she could be treated as a roughly equivalent, domestic satellite for the significantly more far-reaching failures of the Bush administration’s foreign policy. What has been at issue here is the significance of celebrity breakdown as an arena symbolic of political and economic breakdown. As media outlets rendered hypervisible the spectacular breakdown of the complex registers of Spears’ once-seamless gender performance (young woman, mother, and superstar), she came to be considered a threat to our national security, having breached the boundaries of her once-perfect “national body,” as the “all-American,” fantasy girl-next-door, and having failed to endure as a superhuman icon famous for her ability to represent two diametrically opposed possibilities simultaneously. I have suggested that what was so terrifying (provoking severe consequences in the “War on Terror”) about Spears’ fall from grace for the American public was her inability to continue keeping these tensions productive play and what it threatened to tell us about our own national fate, as a country that could no longer feel quite secure in the imperial logics of our manifest destiny after 9/11. Spears’ faltering image came to represent a larger threat to the structuring principles of American national identity, long knowable only through tenuous principles of success most often formulated in the dream of the self-made man. These are the same principles that are often cited as what “makes America great” and “unlike any other country in the world,” with threats posed to them given over as justification for war. Without intending to, Spears called into question the American value system by exposing the violence that underlies it and serves as its guarantor by means of wars waged both abroad and close to home. Unwittingly, Spears — someone who had in earnest expressed her total faith in the system — became a martyr to the slow burn of America’s failing promise of freedom for all during the Bush years.

Bibliography


