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Reality television and the hypertrophic celebrity in *Victoria Beckham: Coming to America*

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Tom Mole argues that contemporary celebrity culture has undergone a ‘hypertrophic’ shift marked by the public’s increasing fascination with the mechanics of celebrity production over individual celebrities themselves. This article examines reality television, more specifically what I call ‘celebrity-sanctioned reality television’, as a symptom of this broader shift. Both reality television and hypertrophic celebrity culture rely on the privileged access to the ‘real’ self while simultaneously offering heightened awareness of the processes of constructing that ‘real’, making the television genre an ideal vehicle for the promotion of the hypertrophic celebrity. The 2007 reality special, *Victoria Beckham: Coming to America*, is analysed as a celebrity-sanctioned use of reality television that explicitly aims to deconstruct the celebrity façade in a bid to re-articulate Victoria Beckham’s celebrity image within the American celebrity system. The programme playfully and ironically weds the textual characteristics of reality television to hypertrophic celebrity culture in order to maintain control over the public presentation of the celebrity image – even as it purports to disrupt and expose it. The article concludes with a brief discussion of audience readings of the programme in order to discuss further the viability of the hypertrophic project as a means to construct and maintain attributed celebrity status.

Keywords: celebrity audiences; *Coming to America*; hypertrophic celebrity; media production; reality television; Victoria Beckham

Introduction

In January 2007, Los Angeles Galaxy announced that it had signed English football superstar, David Beckham, to a lucrative five-year deal to play for the American soccer team after his current contract with Réal Madrid expired (AEG 2007). The deal to bring Beckham, who was described in their press release as ‘the most recognizable athlete in the world’, to Los Angeles was a move to increase the profile of the LA team and, more importantly, to boost American interest in a sport already beloved by the rest of the world (ibid., para. 2). Buoyed by numerous endorsement deals with sports and non-sports-related products, as well as his position, along with his wife, Victoria, as mainstay of British and European tabloids, Beckham’s media celebrity often eclipses his athletic achievements. Richard Dyer’s groundbreaking work on stardom recognises that the star image is based on the tension between the public image (e.g. the public performance as an actor or singer) and ‘the real person who is the site or occasion’ of that image (Dyer 1986, p. 8). Chris Rojek

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points to this ‘split between private and public self’ as the key element of stardom as presented in the media (Rojek 2001, p. 11). The public self of the star is the staged presentation of his or her ‘public’ face—often emerging from the public performance that brought the star to prominence (ibid.). Audiences want to know if the star is ‘really’ who she appears to be, and search all aspects of that image for clues to what Rojek calls the ‘veridical’ (‘real’) self behind the staged public face (ibid.). Thus, as P. David Marshall argues, such ‘connections between celebrities’ “real” lives and their working lives’ are necessary for contemporary celebrity status (Marshall 1997, p. 58).

However, as Dyer notes with regard to film stardom, not all ‘manifestations [of the star image] are necessarily equal’ (Dyer 1986, p. 3). According to Dyer, ‘[A] film star’s films are likely to have a privileged place in his or her image’, suggesting that a star’s talent-based claims to fame remain the dominant part of his or her image (ibid.). Although his private life is always a part of his image, the transition of David Beckham’s celebrity to America in this moment was predicated largely upon his ability to perform publicly as an athlete over a focus upon his private-side persona. This reflects a more traditional conception of stardom in which fame is grounded in ‘talent’ rather than solely the result of the image building machinery of the media. Rojek describes this public recognition of ‘individuals who possess rare talents or skills’ as ‘achieved celebrity’ (Rojek 2001, p. 16).

As celebrity images are constantly in process, David’s private self was not irrelevant to this transition but, at this moment, it was secondary to appeals to his athletic talent. In other words, US sport and celebrity media attention to David’s private life served both to deepen the meaning of his public face by reinforcing the public’s recognition of his skill and talent and to use his existing achieved celebrity status to draw America’s attention to the sport.

The transition of Victoria Beckham’s celebrity image in this same moment, on the other hand, can be read as a key example of a contemporary shift from ‘star’ to ‘celebrity’ that is marked primarily by a move away from fame grounded in talent to fame as a product of a media industry ‘publicity machine . . . churning out many admired commodities called celebrities, famous because they have been made to be’ (Gamson 1994, p. 16). Rojek calls this ‘attributed celebrity’ and argues that it arises ‘as the result of the concentrated representation of the individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries’ without any necessary connection to talent or skill (Rojek 2001, p. 18). Although Rojek suggests that the star is ‘out of face’ when the veridical or private-life discourses surrounding the star overtake the carefully constructed public face, such a split is a necessary condition of the attributed celebrity who has little or no claim to unique skill or talent to ground her image (ibid., p. 17). Unlike achieved celebrity, the attributed celebrity focuses upon the (apparent) revelation of the veridical self in the media as the claim to fame.

Christine Geraghty usefully identifies a gendered distinction that often divides achieved and attributed celebrity. As she explains, ‘the common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity fits with the emphasis, in the discourse of “celebrity,” on the private life and leisure activity of the star’ (Geraghty 2000, p. 196). Female stars are ‘particularly likely to be seen as celebrities whose working life is of less interest and worth than their personal life’ and therefore more likely to be considered attributed celebrities (ibid., p. 187, 196). At the time of her husband’s deal with the Galaxy, Victoria Beckham did not have a clear tie to public achievement to bring to American audiences. Instead, as is typical of attributed celebrity, she attempted to strengthen her comparatively low celebrity status in the American context through media representations of her private life, specifically through the reality television special Victoria Beckham: Coming to America (2007). By engaging the characteristics of
reality television, Victoria could exert a greater control over the presentation of her veridical self in the media in such a way that supports her continued claim to media-based fame.

I do not, of course, intend to imply that Victoria Beckham is solely responsible for the construction of the celebrity ‘Victoria Beckham’ on offer in the reality special *Coming to America*, rather that ‘Victoria Beckham’ is constructed primarily by the programme’s producers, writers and directors in addition to herself. The programme was executive-produced by her (and David’s) manager, Simon Fuller, the Spice Girls producer who also heads the tightly controlled celebrity-production-machine-cum-reality-programme *American Idol* (2002–present) and thus is well versed in the promotional possibilities of reality programming. Victoria’s explicit involvement behind the scenes as a producer, as well as her role as the star of the programme, points to her active influence over the construction of her image within it. I argue that this programme is an example of what I call ‘celebrity-sanctioned’ reality television in which the celebrity and her producers are able to control the presentation of the veridical self in ways that support their interests in her continued fame.

Celebrity-sanctioned reality television offers new insight into the attributed celebrity as a key player in what Tom Mole calls a ‘hypertrophic’ shift in contemporary (western) celebrity culture (Mole 2004). Within ‘hypertrophic celebrity culture’, the public is increasingly fascinated not with individual stars, but with the mechanics of celebrity production. Although the celebrity publicity system is by no means invisible, it has historically been ‘presented in a way that posed hardly a threat to the notion of natural, deserved celebrity’ (Gamson, 1994, p. 33). However, Mole points out that contemporary celebrity culture is marked by a conscious and self-reflexive disclosure of the mechanisms of media publicity as the new standard-bearer of celebrity status. In this ‘hypertrophic celebrity culture . . . the structure of the apparatus is becoming as much an object of fascination as the individuals it promotes. An organic structure becomes hypertrophic when it grows in such an exaggerated way that its function in the organism or ecosystem is affected’ (Mole 2004).

This trend can be identified across media forms, but Mole argues it has a particularly close affinity with reality television and its blurring of the boundaries between the private and public self. Su Holmes argues that reality television offers ‘the heightened awareness of the very process of representation’, and this awareness is a key element of Mole’s definition of hypertrophic celebrity culture (Holmes 2004, p. 128, emphasis in original). Mole says, ‘[J]ust as postmodern architecture displays the ducts and pipes that make a building function, so hypertrophic celebrity foregrounds the mechanisms that manufacture celebrities’ (Mole 2004, para. 6). The appeal of popular reality programmes such as *Pop Idol* (2001–03), Mole claims, is that they purport to give audiences access to, and even an interactive role in, the very act of constructing a new celebrity out of an ordinary person, a process that has historically been hidden and naturalised by the celebrity producers. Yet while some mechanisms are brought to the surface in these programmes, Mole usefully concludes that such self-conscious exposure inevitably masks deeper levels of manipulation, allowing the media industry to exploit the public’s fascination with the mechanisms of celebrity as a way to control the representation of a specific celebrity or celebrity culture more broadly.

Following Mole, I suggest that reality television is a key space for such interrogation because it highlights the primacy of discourses of the private and veridical self as a mode of deconstructing contemporary celebrity images. However, I wish to extend Mole’s original analysis to discuss how existing attributed celebrities (and attendant cultural intermediaries) use the hypertrophic appeal of reality television to gain greater control over the representation of their images. Victoria Beckham’s use of reality television to
construct/maintain her attributed celebrity within the context of American media provides a useful example for a discussion of the complexities of this hypertrophic shift. In coming to America not through a talent-based public performance but through the 2007 reality television special *Victoria Beckham: Coming to America*, Victoria explicitly and self-reflexively engages markers of the hypertrophic media-based celebrity culture already familiar to the American audience in order to support her status as an attributed celebrity.

**Victoria’s celebrity image**

Victoria Beckham was not entirely unknown to American audiences before her reality special. She emerged into the public eye in the late 1990s as ‘Posh Spice’, a member of the massively popular all-girl pop group, The Spice Girls. The group’s first album, *Spice* (1997), produced multiple hit singles and sold more than 19 million copies worldwide, securing their fame within the world of pop music. This claim to achieved celebrity was rather tenuous, however, as even at the height of their popularity the group itself was widely known to be a pop commodity created and publicised by so-called media ‘Svengali’ Simon Fuller (Dinh and Murphy 2007). Formed in London during the late 1990s renaissance of British youth culture that positioned the United Kingdom as ‘the place to which we must all look to learn how to act, think, and dress’, Fuller’s vision of the Spice Girls successfully parlayed this sense of British ‘cool’ into global pop stardom (Kamp 1997, p. 1). The public knowledge of the group’s construction certainly did not diminish their fame; it simply contained it within the story of media-produced, rather than talent-based, fame. Fans seemed to accept such media manipulation as a natural and even pleasurable part of these celebrity images.

The group never disbanded officially, although the various members have been pursuing other projects since the departure of Ginger Spice (Geri Halliwell) in 1998 and the lacklustre sales of the group’s last album, *Forever* (2000). However, the fading of the Spice Girls’ initial fame hardly mattered for the individual fame of Victoria Beckham. As is typical of attributed celebrity, Victoria’s tenuous claim to talent-based fame had already been overshadowed by the details of her private life, most notably around her roles as a wife to Manchester United football star David Beckham and a mother to their three boys, emphasising the gendered nature of her attributed celebrity. ‘Posh ‘n Becks’, as the British tabloids dubbed them, have been at the centre of a media circus since the start of their relationship, particularly in light of such scandals as David’s alleged infidelities and the constant scrutiny of Victoria’s waifish figure and surgical enhancements (Dinh and Murphy 2008). The British tabloids position the couple as ‘popular royals’ who rose from middle- or working-class obscurity to the heights of fame, epitomised by their over-the-top wedding and ostentatious ‘Beckingham Palace’ home, yet retain a ‘down-to-earthness’ that makes them relatable to audiences (Biressi and Nunn 2004, p. 45). Such framings articulate the glamour and conspicuous consumption of celebrity onto historical conceptions of British class identity, grounding Victoria’s image within the British context and, at this point, distancing her more from American audiences who were not as familiar with these cultural markers. The challenge of bringing Victoria to America is to translate this existing attributed celebrity status into a context in which she remains comparatively unknown, in part because of the British specificity of her image. That she uses reality television as the site of this translation is important to understanding how attributed celebrity functions within hypertrophic celebrity culture.
Reality television and hypertrophic celebrity culture

Capitalising on television’s claim to intimacy, reality television, with its emphasis on capturing the often ordinary and quotidian events of ‘real’ life, is a television genre concerned explicitly with revealing the private individual for public consumption. Although mediated through a camera and manipulated by producers and editors, reality television’s textual characteristics rest nevertheless upon a ‘self-conscious claim to the discourse of the real’ (Biressi and Nunn 2004, p. 2). Mark Andrejevic argues that the camera’s ‘perpetual surveillance’ of the daily lives of a reality programme’s participants acts as ‘the antidote to artificial interactions’, allowing audiences to believe that despite any control ‘producers have in the editing process’, reality TV ultimately presents ‘real’ people who are just ‘being themselves’ (Andrejevic 2002, p. 261). This sort of self-conscious exposure of the real is central to hypertrophic celebrity culture’s affinity with reality TV. Mole’s discussion of the new hypertrophic celebrity culture focuses upon reality competitions such as Idol and Big Brother in which ordinary individuals, such as (the now late) Big Brother (UK) contestant Jade Goody, become ‘famous for having been made famous’ (Mole 2004, para. 9, emphasis in original). This shifts the definition of attributed celebrity to encompass not simply the individuals themselves, but ‘our new fascination with the mechanisms that make celebrity function’ (ibid.).

The genre of reality television has also been harnessed by existing celebrities (i.e. individuals who are already public figures) as a platform for the maintenance of fame. Much of the current academic engagement (Gillan 2004; Holmes 2004, 2006; Kompare 2009) with reality programmes featuring existing celebrities tends to focus upon celebrities whose primary moment of fame has passed as participants in reality television (notably on celebrity versions of programmes that typically cast ordinary people as contestants, such as the celebrity version of Survivor, I’m a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here [2002–present (UK); 2003 and 2009 (US)] as a means to reclaim previous fame through the media exposure granted by appearing on the programme. As these programmes focus upon the veridical self of the celebrity, talent-based claims to fame become even less important, although they may remain relevant to the audiences’ initial knowledge of the individual as a public figure. Instead, the celebrity’s willingness to allow audiences behind the mask – that is, to witness simultaneously the construction of the celebrity image and see the ‘real’ person beneath it in an ‘out of face’ moment – is itself taken as a new claim to fame within hypertrophic celebrity culture.

Early narrative celebrity reality programmes, such as the highly successful MTV series The Osbournes (2002–05) and Newlyweds: Nick & Jessica (2003–05), moved away from competition-style programmes and became more hypertrophic in their promise of access to the actual everyday lives of the featured celebrity in his or her natural habitat. In a reversal of Mole’s ordinary-to-extraordinary construction of fame on reality television, these programmes highlight the celebrities as ordinary people who also ‘happen’ to be famous. The success of these narrative reality programmes, both in terms of ratings and in terms of increasing the celebrity status of the stars involved, suggests that celebrities (and their producers) quickly recognised that the textual characteristics of reality television could offer greater control over the presentation of the veridical self when the programme is produced by the celebrity (and the cultural workers whose promotional interests align with the celebrity’s). Within a hypertrophic celebrity culture marked by the tension between the real and the façade of celebrity, such control of the media-produced image is crucial for the maintenance of attributed celebrity status.

This led to the rise of ‘celebrity-sanctioned’ reality television in which the deconstruction of celebrity culture is harnessed by the celebrity (and related cultural intermediaries)
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to promote a specific version of the celebrity image. Unlike the competition programmes, in which the programme’s producers often have very different investments in the celebrity image and are less interested in how the celebrity herself may want to be represented, the celebrity-sanctioned reality programme is built upon the celebrity’s complicity in, if not more direct control over, the production of the programme as a promotional vehicle for her image. The celebrity’s ability to control the presentation of her own image across media forms is increasingly important to the maintenance of fame because, as Su Holmes and Sean Redmond argue, the audience’s ‘constant search for truth – even if it is a search for the “lies” that hide behind the idealised mask of stardom and celebrification – is intensified in an age where new media technologies and new media formats have increased the range and nature of surveillance’ (Holmes and Redmond 2006, p. 210). The celebrity-sanctioned narrative reality programme allows the celebrity to control the surveilling eye of the camera as a means to shape her image by offering ‘unguarded’ access to the ‘real’ while simultaneously exposing the role of tabloids and other media outside her control in constructing her image. This access is framed as real because it comes from the celebrity herself while simultaneously obscuring the fact that the image presented is controlled and constructed in the interest of the celebrity.

For example, Jennifer Gillan reads the short-lived reality programme Britney and Kevin: Chaotic (2005) as ‘star-sanctioned tabloid coverage and rumour control’ that purports to show pop-star Britney Spears as she ‘really’ is through the extensive use of Spears’ personal camcorder footage interspersed with interview-style commentary from Spears and then-husband, Kevin Federline (Gillan 2007, p. 80). Both Spears and Federline also served as producers, further revealing their role in shaping the programme’s presentation of Spears’ image. Here, celebrity-sanctioned reality television enables Spears to intervene ‘in her own cultural circulation’ in an attempt to regain control over her own image during the tabloid feeding frenzy surrounding her romantic relationship with and eventual marriage to Federline (ibid., p. 87). The audience comes to the programme already knowing who Spears is, and the narrative functions as a struggle over who really controls her authentic celebrity image, Spears or the tabloids.

To that end, Chaotic’s narrative is premised on the exclusion, or at least an extreme glossing-over, of certain problematic aspects of their relationship that were splashed all over the tabloids, such as Federline’s abandonment of pregnant girlfriend Shar Jackson in pursuit of his relationship with Spears (ibid., p. 80). Through the narrative of the programme, Spears explicitly refutes extra-textual tabloid stories of her as a home-wrecker and Federline as an opportunist, and works to reclaim her original ‘good girl’ pop princess image as the dominant one for audiences. This mode of recuperation of the celebrity image, I suggest, is the hallmark of celebrity-sanctioned reality television and is central to the attempt to move Victoria Beckham’s fame to the American context. The Victoria Beckham presented in the reality special Coming to America is always already famous, and the narrative of the programme works to demonstrate that she is ‘just like us’ because she playfully helps the audience pull back the layers of media construction that create her image while simultaneously constructing a preferred version of that image.

‘It’s exhausting being fabulous’: America ‘meets’ Victoria Beckham

Victoria Beckham: Coming to America aired as a one-hour ‘special’ on NBC on 16 July 2007, just days after the arrival of the Beckham family to their new home in Los Angeles (Norman 2007). The narrative of Coming to America takes place three weeks prior to this arrival, and follows Victoria – entourage in tow – as she prepares for the family’s transition
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to a new life in America. NBC executive Craig Plestis describes the programme as an opportunity for ‘[V]iewers [to] get a first-hand glimpse into what it’s like to be one of the most sought-after celebrities in the world’ (quoted in ibid., para. 3). One might assume that the arrival of such a ‘sought-after’ celebrity to Los Angeles, arguably the celebrity capital of America, would centre upon the promotion of her public persona. However, the narrative logic of the programme presents her arrival as one of private and familial duty, namely house-hunting, meeting the neighbours and finding new schools for her children, as a means to ease her family’s transition to their new home. She may be chased by the paparazzi as she undertakes these tasks, reminding the audience that she is already a celebrity, but her actions and motives foreground her as an ordinary person who happens to exist within the extraordinary world of celebrity culture, thus highlighting the ‘ordinary/extraordinary paradox’ that has long been crucial to stardom (Dyer 1979).

Victoria Beckham: Coming to America is a self-conscious and self-reflexive bid to lay bare the inner-workings of the American celebrity system while simultaneously attempting to strengthen Victoria’s celebrity within that system.

In the opening sequence of the programme, Victoria Beckham is hailed as ‘an international icon of fashion and glamour . . . married to soccer superstar David Beckham, the hottest man alive’ (Fuller 2007). This narration occurs over shots of Victoria on the red carpet, posing for magazine photo shoots and interacting with other celebrities. She is decidedly not an ordinary person who is seeking fame, like the reality television participants in Mole’s original argument. This is a crucial aspect of Victoria’s hypertrophic appeal because by proving her existing celebrity status, regardless of its connection to talent, she is given the authority to peel back the façade of celebrity culture and expose its inner workings for the audience. Through the voyeuristic eye of the camera(s) that follow her every move, audiences are assured that they are being given privileged access to her everyday life and, more tellingly, to the ways in which the ‘real’ Victoria negotiates the process of being the celebrity ‘Victoria Beckham’. Her apparent willingness to reveal the artifice of her own attributed celebrity through the reality programme becomes the means of reaffirming her fame for American audiences. Although she appears to give up control of her public image by allowing the voyeuristic surveillance of the reality television cameras to follow her daily life, she actually exerts much more control over the self presented to audiences. Audiences used to the conventions of reality television are probably aware of this, but the narrative’s emphasis on representations of her private life as her ‘real’ life ‘deliberately elide[s] any contextualization that might foreground what [she is] doing as promotion’ (Turner et al. 2000, p. 13). This is the key appeal of the celebrity-sanctioned reality programme, as it allows celebrities to regain control over their image using the same media tools that typically disrupt that control.

‘I reckon this is what Paris Hilton does every single day’: Victoria Beckham as hypertrophic celebrity

Coming to America, like other narrative-based reality programmes in the docu-soap or sitcom style, structures its plot through a combination of ‘fly-on-the-wall’ documentary-style footage of Victoria’s daily activities with confessional-style interviews that serve to frame the action through her first-person perspective. This allows her to both perform her ‘real’ self and comment upon her constructed image (Ouellette and Murray, 2004). However, as Susan Ouellette and Laurie Murray argue, although ‘reality TV whets our desire for the authentic, much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains “fictional” elements’
The Victoria Beckham presented in *Coming to America* pokes fun playfully at her constructed celebrity image in a way that lets the audience share in the pleasure of deconstructing her staged public face while simultaneously using this appeal to her veridical self as a marker of authenticity that makes her worthy of our attention. Such an appeal to irony has, Joshua Gamson argues, ‘become a common piece of the celebrity public persona’ and celebrity-sanctioned reality television is an ideal vehicle for the promotion of this aspect of the celebrity image (Gamson 1994, p. 52). However, in order for it to be believable, the Victoria revealed by the cameras must be able to negotiate both the public and private to prove she ‘gets the joke’ of celebrity culture as a façade even as she strives to be a part of it. She must overcome the ‘miserable pouty bitch’ persona typically ascribed to her celebrity image in order to prove she is actually willing ‘to smile for America’ and engage this ironic stance (Fuller 2007). After all, hypertrophic celebrity is not aimed at destroying the system; rather, it activates the apparent deconstruction of celebrity as a site of audience pleasure.

For example, the arrival of Renee Gauthier, the woman who will eventually be hired as Victoria’s personal assistant, allows Victoria and, by extension, the audience to play with the distinction between the ‘real’ and the ‘celebrity’ versions of herself. Victoria answers the doorbell herself, telling her entourage that ‘It’s good that she thinks I’m kind of normal... Posh can open doors too’, positioning herself as an ordinary person who, despite celebrity status (as referenced in her use of the name ‘Posh’) is normal enough to answer her own door (Fuller 2007). However, in the confessional-style interview that frames this segment, Victoria describes the qualities she desires in a personal assistant, saying: ‘[S]he can’t be too good looking. She can’t be too thin. It’s gotta be all about me’ (ibid.). She cheekily reasserts her specialness as a celebrity and her need to be the centre of attention, hailing her glamorous and extraordinary celebrity image but in a playful and ironic way that is meant to poke fun at the ‘Posh’ image as it has been constructed. *Coming to America* invites audiences to search Victoria’s celebrity image for the real but stops short of pointing out explicitly that this real is itself constructed, thus masking the deeper purpose of the programme as a promotional vehicle for her.

Throughout the programme, Victoria engages the tension between ‘real’ and ‘constructed’ in ways that make visible the normally hidden parts of the celebrity apparatus. In one notable moment, she devises a plan to fool the paparazzi who follow her every move so that she may buy a gift for David without the press ruining the surprise by publishing photos of her entering a store selling high-end men’s watches. On one hand, this sort of endeavour is far removed from the daily life of an ordinary person, yet her self-deprecating plan of using a blow-up doll dressed in her clothing as a decoy uses humour and self-mockery to bring her back down to earth and reaffirm that she is as much an onlooker to her own celebrity persona as is the audience. That Victoria’s own attributed celebrity is, in part, tied to media representations of her body and its surgical modifications, the use of the plastic blow-up doll as a decoy cheekily hails the artificial nature of her image. Furthermore, her run-ins with the paparazzi reassert the notion that contemporary celebrity is constructed through media surveillance, but that such voyeurism may not actually reveal the truth about the ‘real’ Victoria. Victoria remains acutely aware of the power of the camera and here uses the reality television cameras to construct and circulate her image on her terms, rather than leaving it to the paparazzi. Thus, the doll-as-decoy can be read as an attempt to expose the way in which the celebrity media’s focus upon the publicly visible celebrity body belies the authentic veridical self.

The awareness of the power of the media in constructing the celebrity image as well as the on-going battle over who controls that image are central to understanding the Victoria
offered by *Coming to America*. After her arrival in LA, a member of her British entourage shows her a report on notorious celebrity gossip blog PerezHilton.com featuring paparazzi photos of her at the airport. In the post, Perez makes fun of her unsmiling image, sardonically framing it as evidence that underneath her public face she is really a ‘robot’ or an ‘alien’. Perez is engaged in a mode of deconstruction here, using the evidence of the ‘real’ star, as captured in an unguarded and ‘out of face’ moment in the paparazzi photos, as proof of her veridical self. For Perez, not only is celebrity a façade but, in the case of Victoria Beckham, nothing authentic – or even human – exists beneath it. The importance of Perez’s opinion is not lost on Victoria, as she notes his site receives ‘five and a half million hits per day’, and thus plays a large role in the public perception of her image (ibid.). The ‘real’ Victoria, in response, sets out to meet him and ‘sort him out’ by having a conversation with him so he can see that the Victoria in photographs is not who she ‘really’ is (Fuller 2007).

She goes to find him at the LA coffeehouse that he, rather famously, used as an office in the early days of his blog. The public meeting-place frames the encounter as ‘real’ because she simply shows up (without her entourage) at this public place, as could any ordinary person. Furthermore, within the narrative of the programme, her conversation with Perez allows her to claim that paparazzi photographs are actually a barrier to the ‘real’ Victoria. They show her unfairly as a ‘miserable pouty bitch’, when she is simply caught off-guard by the barrage of flashbulbs, as would be any ordinary person (ibid.). She says, ‘[P]eople see these images and they get a negative impression’ that does not accurately reflect who she ‘really’ is (ibid.). Of course, as they talk, the paparazzi photographers are just outside the window of the coffeehouse, reaffirming the role of media surveillance in constructing the celebrity image. Their presence allows her to playfully call up the very public face she has just deconstructed by refusing to eat the cookie Perez offers, lest she ruin her image. She says, ‘I don’t wanna be seen smiling, having fun or eating – perish the thought. Not while there’s press here because I can’t be seen to actually eat’ (ibid.). By both ‘being’ and deconstructing Victoria Beckham, she exposes the media machinery of fame and frames her ironic detachment from her own celebrity as a new measure of celebrity worth. Yet this deconstruction, however ‘authentic’ it may appear, is still constructed on her terms, allowing Victoria to reclaim control over her own image.

**America’s response to Victoria**

An in-depth analysis of audience reception of Victoria Beckham and *Coming to America* remains outside the scope of this project’s focus on the textual construction of her image in the programme. Nevertheless, there is evidence in popular press reviews and popular online celebrity and television forums that suggest this particular example of celebrity-sanctioned reality television was not entirely successful. I offer here a brief discussion of some reactions to *Coming to America* in order to explore the viability of celebrity-sanctioned reality television as a means to construct and maintain fame within hypertrophic celebrity culture, as well as to illustrate the range of possible readings that are central to the success of such a project. Gamson points out that audiences can be crucial and active players within contemporary celebrity culture, their interest sustained by the fascination with the celebrity system itself (Gamson 1994). Furthermore, understanding shifts in audiences’ willingness to accept ‘hype’ and ‘artifice’ as part of the pleasures of celebrity culture speaks to the overall hypertrophic shift in that culture. Of course, not all viewers participated in online commentary on the programme, but these reviews and comments offer some insight into the range of audience responses to the programme and to hypertrophic celebrity more broadly.
Despite the original plan for six episodes, NBC claims they decided to air what footage they had as a one-hour special when the shooting schedule was reduced unexpectedly as a result of David Beckham’s (temporary) return to England to play for the English national football team (Norman 2007). However, other reports contend that despite their massive celebrity in British and European contexts, Americans were not particularly interested in a reality programme depicting the lives of the Beckhams, and NBC scrapped the series as a result (Ryan 2007). Despite NBC’s positive spin, the cancellation of the series was probably influenced at least somewhat by the scathing reviews of the special by American television critics. These negative reviews speak to the problems of celebrity-sanctioned reality television as a site of hypertrophic celebrity production. Some critics, such as the New York Times television critic Alessandra Stanley, took the programme to task for its thinly veiled promotional project:

\[T\]he special, originally envisioned as a reality series in the style of ‘The Anna Nicole Show or ‘The Simple Life’ or even ‘Hey Paula,’ is just one block in a vast promotional pyramid scheme: While Mr. Beckham whips up his profile in the United States with television interviews, soccer-field appearances, endorsements and Galaxy jersey sales, Mrs. Beckham pumps up her end of their business partnership with her jeans label and line of designer sunglasses and perfume and, of course, the television special. (Stanley 2007, para. 9)

Stanley’s review suggests that the mechanisms revealed by the programme are simply promotional tools and that such obvious manipulations limit, if not destroy, the audience’s pleasure in consuming both the programme and Victoria’s celebrity image. New York Post critic, Linda Stasi, went much further, calling the programme ‘an orgy of self-indulgence so out of whack with, er, reality that you’ll sit there slack-jawed at the gall of these people who think we are that stupid’ (Stasi 2007, para. 4, emphasis in original). She panned the programme as a vapid display of celebrity conceit masquerading as a glimpse of the realVictoria, suggesting the programme’s ‘exclusive’ inside look at Victoria’s larger-than-life life smacks of too much fame, too much money and too much time spent believing the hype for all concerned’ (ibid., para 17). The programme merely demonstrated that there was nothing to her image but those industry-produced mechanisms. This indicates that some reviewers, and perhaps also audiences, have already grown wary of the hypertrophic shift, recognising that claims to irony and post-modern celebrity are simply another level of manipulation disguised as pleasure.

Despite these negative reviews, the programme itself earned decent ratings for NBC during the typically sluggish summer television season by winning its eight o’clock time-slot that Monday (The Insider 2007). In fact, NBC quickly scheduled a rebroadcast of the special the following Thursday evening in the time-slot usually occupied by network ratings powerhouse ER. While ER was scheduled to be a repeat that week, the fact that NBC replaced it with the special and tapped Victoria to host the entire evening’s prime-time line-up in order to promote the re-broadcast demonstrates their faith in the ability of the special to draw an audience. NBC also filmed new interstitial footage of Victoria exclusively for the re-broadcast, a move aimed at drawing in viewers of the original broadcast as well as appealing to new audiences (The Insider 2007). NBC still did not move forward with the reality series, but were able to draw decent ratings for the two broadcasts of the special. There is, however, evidence of multiple reading positions on celebrity gossip and television blogs, suggesting (unsurprisingly) that not all viewers read the programme in the same way. Such multiple readings reveal the complexity of the hypertrophic celebrity culture
and challenge the viability of the celebrity-sanctioned reality programme as a promotional vehicle.

Many of the blog readers who commented on the programme reinforced the scathing reviews, lambasting both the programme and Victoria’s image as nothing but highly constructed industry manipulations. For example, on gossip blog Starmuscle.com, commenter ‘Alaya’ argued that Victoria’s appeal to ‘irony’ is overly constructed and ‘everything has been organised and planned to make her, David, and Simon [Fuller] richer and more famous. And WE ARE IDIOTS for going along with it!!!’ (Starmuscle.com 2007, comment 5, emphasis in original). Similarly, commenter ‘Charlotte’ says ‘Victoria would like you to think she is being ironic and tongue-in-cheek with her humour and image but believe me she really is that superficial, materialistic, stupid, arrogant and fame hungry’ (Starmuscle.com 2007, comment 7). These and similar reactions indicate some audiences, like Gamson’s post-modernist audiences, reject the appeal to the hypertrophic nature of the celebrity culture and see the ‘real’ Victoria as presented in the programme is nothing but artifice and media manipulation (Gamson 1994). For this type of audience, the celebrity-sanctioned programme is a failure and they reject Victoria’s use of it as a claim to fame.

However, many of the comments on these blogs were supportive of the programme, enjoying the apparent revelation of the ‘real’ Victoria. On popular television blog TV.com, commenter ‘Kris2theTi’ says: ‘I think the reason [the programme] drew me in so much wasn’t just the fact that I love her, but it was the fact that she is normal to [sic]. She’s funny, she laughs, and all she wants to have people be honest with her . . . She is modest and just wants to live life to the fullest’ (TV.com 2007, comment 11). Similarly, commenter ‘kristifsteph’ says: ‘I watched the show “Victoria Beckham Coming to America” and I just loved it. She is sooo funny as well as beautiful. She seems so down to earth, not at all what I expected’ (TV.com 2007, comment 3). Viewers such as these fit within the hypertrophic model, as they find pleasure in seeing the processes of the celebrity system exposed by the ‘real’ star. However, they do not engage in post-modern readings that reveal deeper levels of construction, as they are satisfied that reality television works as a site of the ‘real’. This aligns them more with Gamson’s ‘second-order traditionalists’ who ‘see a complex narrative in which publicity mechanisms play a part but do not post an obstacle to esteem’ (Gamson 1994, p. 147). These viewers are an important audience for celebrity-sanctioned reality television because such programming allows them to recognise the role of media in producing fame but also continue, as Dyer suggests, ‘to think [of stars] in terms of “really”’ (Dyer 1986, p. 2). In other words, they accept the image presented by the celebrity-sanctioned reality programme as ‘real’ without questioning the manipulation of that image.

Hypertrophic celebrity culture, however, encourages another type of post-modern reading, similar to that of Gamson’s category of ‘game-players’ in which viewers make the process of deconstruction itself the sole, or at least most important, source of pleasure (Gamson 1994). In this sort of reading, the goal is to see the processes of manipulation and find pleasure in the celebrity’s negotiation of that process, not to discover the ‘real’ person behind those processes. Such readings are tied more closely to hypertrophic celebrity culture because they allow viewers to recognise celebrity as constructed at all levels. More crucially, the notion that what is revealed by the programme only hides more levels of manipulation and artifice does not diminish their pleasure in consuming the celebrity image. It may, in fact, increase their pleasure.

For example, several viewers/commenters took the critics to task for not ‘getting’ the programme and applauded Victoria’s willingness to mock her own celebrity status
and American celebrity culture more broadly. Referencing her established British image, Starmuscle.com commenter ‘Jack’ said:

America just didn’t get it. Posh sends herself up something rotten in this complete spoof. VB’s parody of the US style fly on the wall celeb documentary was spot on. If you suffered through Paris and Nicole or the Jessica & Nick’s Newlyweds you probably should watch this again. Brilliantly funny. Superbly subtle and crass and awful all at the same time, exactly what [sic] was meant to be. (Starmuscle.com 2007, comment 2)

‘Jack’ exhibited an ironic approach that read Victoria and her participation in the programme as nothing but ‘spoof’ and artifice. The pleasure is in the process, not the revelation of the ‘real’ self. This level of irony is not crucial to such pleasure, however. For example, ‘Posh Rules’ also voiced a positive response to the programme and Victoria as a celebrity, but without the ironic lens used by ‘Jack’:

I actually enjoyed it and thought it was quite good, as far as these things go. Very refreshing and different from the horrid dreck that is the reality tv landscape in the US. Of course she’s ‘self-indulgent’ and ‘self-promoting.’ What celeb isn’t??!! Be that as it may I found her funny, charming, and quite sympathetic. (Starmuscle.com 2007, comment 2)

‘Posh Rules’ seemed to take the revelation of the authentic Victoria as real, but primarily enjoyed seeing how that self is manipulated as part of the business of being a celebrity. That the celebrity image must be manipulated is simply part of playing the fame game, and uncovering that game is a site of viewer pleasure that drives hypertrophic celebrity culture. Mole would suggest that ‘game-players’ such as ‘Jack’ and ‘Posh Rules’ are most central to the hypertrophic shift in celebrity culture because they seem to care more about the mechanisms, and the media formats that expose them, than the individual celebrity. Again focusing upon reality competition programmes such as Idol, he says that while individual stars that emerge from these programmes often quickly fade into obscurity, audiences ‘remain fascinated by the structures that support a celebrity profile’ (Mole 2004, p. 6). Thus, the failure of this particular programme, in continuing as a series and in promoting Victoria Beckham to American audiences, does not undermine the relevance of the hypertrophic shift in contemporary celebrity culture. In fact, Mole suggests one consequence of the increased fascination with the mechanics of celebrity culture across media forms is that the format, and not the individual celebrity, endures.

The format of celebrity-sanctioned reality television continues to be re-deployed around other celebrities, with varying degrees of success. Some recent examples in the United States include Keyshia Cole: The Way It Is (2006–07), The Girls Next Door (2005–10), Denise Richards: It’s Complicated (2007–09) and Gene Simmons: Family Jewels (2006–present). It may be that as these other programmes have found a home on cable networks (particularly on E! or VH1, two American networks known for their celebrity-orientated reality programming) rather than on the major networks because they draw a smaller, niche audience of viewers – who perhaps are already interested in the deconstruction inherent in hypertrophic celebrity culture. Alternatively, that these celebrities do not cast the sort of explicitly ironic gaze on their own images may allow them to be read as more ‘authentic’ rather than continually constructed. A full discussion of the complex portrayals of celebrity within each of these programmes and audience readings of them are outside the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the fact that they continue to be produced and to attract audiences speaks to the on-going viability of hypertrophic celebrity culture and reality television as a site of celebrity-sanctioned image production.
Conclusion

Coming to America’s lack of major success, however, points to the danger of the hypertrophic project as a means of celebrity image control. It is a difficult balancing act, demanding that irony and sincerity be read by audiences as equally authentic components of the celebrity image. As producers can never guarantee audience responses, Dyer claims that audiences may read what was intended as a marker of authenticity by the producers as markers of hype and artifice. He says, ‘[C]orroboration that a star is really like she/he appears may work, but may be read as further manipulation; showing that the star is not really like she/he appears may itself be taken up into the image, its further construction and rereading, but it could also shatter the illusion altogether’ (Dyer 1991, p. 137, emphasis in original). Engaging the characteristics of celebrity-sanctioned reality television as a bid to present the authentic Victoria Beckham may have backfired in this case, as American audiences less familiar with the ‘Beckham brand’ as it has been constructed in the British media may have lacked the knowledge (or the interest) to judge the self-mocking appeals to authenticity made by Victoria as evidence of her celebrity value. Of course, even the negative reviews meant that Victoria remained in the public eye, so the programme was somewhat successful – at least temporarily – increasing American media and public attention to the Beckhams as a celebrity couple and Victoria as an individual celebrity.

Furthermore, it is crucial to point out that the reality special was not the only media space used to bring Victoria to the attention of American audiences in the weeks following her husband’s deal with the Galaxy, nor did its lack of major success erase her image completely from the American media landscape. The Spice Girls’ reunion album and subsequent 2008 tour increased her visibility in the American public eye, as did her much-hyped, although not necessarily well-received, guest appearances (as herself) on popular American television programmes, such as Dancing with the Stars (2007), Ugly Betty (2007), Project Runway (2008) and American Idol (2010). She continues to appear in American gossip magazines and on blogs (particularly Perez Hilton’s), although typically not on the cover or as a main story. Tellingly, these media appearances focus upon her private life, her fashion choices, her body and/or her role as a mother, thus reinforcing her attributed celebrity status and, more crucially, the gendered nature of attributed celebrity in general.

Thus, while Coming to America did not herald the arrival of Victoria as America’s new media darling, its poor showing did not completely ruin her either. Mole says, ‘[A]lthough it appears to be centred on an individual, celebrity culture is in fact radically rhizomatic. It operates as an inter-textual network in which texts from several media (film, television, photography, print) collectively create a public profile that is not, finally, under anyone’s control’ (Mole 2004, p. 4). The multi-faceted and inter-textual nature of stardom allows her image to be recuperated and redeployed by various producers (including, but not exclusively, by herself and her cultural producers) in order to maintain her celebrity in its new context. Nevertheless, Coming to America and its use of celebrity-sanctioned reality television as a means to re-articulate her celebrity into the American context offers insight into on-going struggle for control in contemporary discourses of fame and the usefulness of a broader application of the hypertrophic celebrity in reality television.

Notes

1. Although the programme was subsequently broadcast in Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom, it was produced originally for NBC and American television audiences. Thus, I restrict my analysis to the initial American broadcast of the programme.
2. At the time of filming and broadcast of *Coming to America*, the group had not yet announced plans to reunite for a greatest hits album and a world tour (Dinh and Murphy 2008).


5. When *Coming to America* was broadcast on British television on 17 July 2007, a disclaimer stating that ‘some scenes have been staged for dramatic effect’ and that the ‘role of the assistant is played by an actress’ appeared at the bottom of the screen. However, this disclaimer was not included in the original American broadcast and there was no indication for American audiences that Renee Gauthier was hired to play Victoria’s personal assistant. She is simply listed in the credits of the American broadcast as one of two ‘assistants’ and while her IMDB.com page lists her as an actress and a stand-up comedian, her credit for the programme lists her as appearing as ‘Herself – Victoria’s personal assistant’ (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0974957/).

References


