

Reality television has spent the past 15 years or so doing seemingly two things only. On the one hand, it has been resuscitating former stars via caricatures of themselves (for example, Bret Michaels the sex-obsessed rock-star who, even in his 40s, can't be satisfied with just one pair of breasts to play with). On the other, it has been throwing charismatic nobodies at the proverbial 'wall' of fame to see who sticks (resulting in, among other things, the rather large amount of [in]famous 'bitches' – Omarosa, etc.) It has always seemed to me that reality TV's primary impact on star culture has been its ability to place lovability and loathsomeness on an even keel; fame and infamy don't seem that different anymore. To me, reality television is just a mass of lovable loners and charismatic villains. But this entire move into reality television has required a culture of largely dead stars and non-stars – individuals who, prior to their appearance in a given reality program, could hardly be said to have a public image to preserve. What of the more traditional stars – those too active and prosperous in the entertainment world to make a splash in the gutter of reality television?

At roughly the same time as reality television was born, the 'making of' or 'behind the scenes' straight-to-video documentary also had its beginning. (MTV's The Real World debuted in 1992, while Criterion's "50th Anniversary" Laserdisc of Citizen Kane was released in 1991.) As much as 'reality' programming has come to dominate television, 'special features' have become ubiquitous among the DVD collections of the modern film consumer. In looking at these pieces of 'new media' footage – which can be as polished as the classical documentary stylings of Keith Fulton and Louis Pepe, or as amateurish as the interview montages of Laurent Bouzereau – a number of themes are readily apparent.

Firstly, the position of director is now portrayed as extremely different from other jobs in the entertainment profession. It is not simply, as Timothy Corrigan has suggested, that auteurism

has been co-opted as an advertising device, but that the auteur has actually become – in terms of a DVD viewing experience – the biggest star on the set. Off camera workers vanish almost entirely in ‘special features,’ and even renowned actors are relegated to a position in the proceedings in which they do little more than discuss their own role (marginalizing their own input into the creativity of the entire work), praise the director (elevating his or her status above theirs), and perform comical routines or one-liners for the camera (becoming ‘entertainers’ even ‘behind the scenes’). Even the comparatively glamorous actor becomes little more than the jester at the director’s court of intellectual creativity. The ‘king’s court’ metaphor might be an apt one, in fact, as it does appear that only those who can be proclaimed as central to the artistic process of filmmaking can be considered bona fide ‘stars’ worth documenting; directors, who can be credited with writing, photographing, and even ‘performing’ the work on the screen seem to be the only ones worth watching. The star is a self-sufficient artist; everyone else is a pawn.

In isolating these directors as creative masterminds, featurettes tend to grace every one of them with exactly the same traits: pensiveness, visual creativity, coherence of ‘vision,’ and a methodical demeanor. We always get footage of them deep in thought and calmly instructing the crew (who are invariably misunderstanding the needs of the film) on the way to the accomplishment of a particular goal. When possible, they are shown actually creating freehand art or storyboards; in a pinch, a line of dialogue which ties them to matte painting or digital effects work will suffice. And, just to add a touch of pleasantness to the ultimate ‘white collar’ (or perhaps ‘no collar’) job of being an artist, they are usually also shown happily interacting with animal actors and the pop-musicians who are scoring their films. More than anything, we have images of the wonderful toy-box of a boy king.

I wonder, then, in this obsession with the ‘true artist’ and the marginalizing of even those who would traditionally have been termed ‘stars,’ do we have evidence of a further twist to fame in the reality TV era? If one is not a lovable loner (which the actors might well be) or a charismatic villain, must one be a ‘pure artist’ – perpetually in calm transcendence over the small world that he rules? Has the glut of charismatic losers and ‘overall champions’ on reality television resulted in ‘self-sufficiency’ or ‘completeness’ as the new mantra for those whose star status is untarnished? Are only those in the ‘judging chairs’ considered ‘true stars’? In brief, has operative factor in ‘stardom’ become less a matter of ‘fame’ and more a matter of ‘power’?