

Celebrity and the Presidential Dream

by Michael Curtis



Catherine Deneuve

Political ambition in the United States should be made of sterner stuff than that possessed by successful performers who can and are increasingly manipulating their celebrity for material or political advantage. We know from *Hamlet* that the theatrical performer in a dream of passion can resemble reality, forcing his soul, with tears in his eyes and broken voice, whose whole function is to get listeners to accept a pretended state of mind. Today, in the U.S. successful performers, celebrities in the entertainment world, are going further in ambitious efforts to persuade listeners that they have the right stuff for high political office or can play a significant role in public affairs.

We are familiar in fictional representation with the impact of a celebrities on affairs and decision making. Almost everyone admires the now iconic film *Casablanca*, set in 1942 during

World War II, in which the central figure, the seemingly cynical Rick, pretending to be neutral in the War, and played by the charismatic Humphrey Bogart, uses his charm and strong personality to inform us that the fight for a higher purpose, the struggle against Nazism, must be waged irrespective of romantic involvements.

It is however bewildering that so many celebrities, people who gain fame and public attention and who are known for being known, in the U.S. in the form of media and sports personalities, if not as appealing as Bogart, are now invading the arena of higher politics. Individuals lacking any serious political background or familiarity with internal or external affairs are proposing themselves as candidates to be taken seriously for political office, especially for the U.S. presidency.

We have entered a period of disenchantment with established authorities, as results of elections in Western Europe and the U.S. have shown, and voters have approved the desirability of accepting outsiders from outside the normal political arena to govern. Donald Trump showed that entry into politics and success of candidates need not require previously holding a political position, although he did have executive experience in other areas of social and economic life. That entry has become more inviting for celebrities with name recognition, who are good communicators, have moving personal narratives, and portray optimism.

Enter two formidable ladies, Oprah Winfrey and Catherine Deneuve, eager in different ways to influence public opinion on issues important to them. Oprah Winfrey, the 63 year old TV host, who won the Cecil B. DeMille award, the first black woman to do so, exhibited her star power and dazzled listeners with her acceptance speech at the Golden Globes ceremony in Beverley Hills, California, on January 7, 2018.

Winfrey is on cue as a role model for politics, the current

celebrity on the block, very wealthy, self made, an attractive black woman devoid of ethnic complications, but with little or no experience in political matters, though shrewd in the ways of the world. She exhibited this and the extent of her influence among other ways when after she bought 10% of the company of Weight Watchers, the value of the company increased rapidly.

However her political outlook and intellectual horizon appears somewhat more imprecise. In her acceptance speech at the ceremony, she expressed her interest in saying "something about how men and women really behave," and maintained hope for "a brighter morning, even during our darkest nights." Her rhetoric seems to embody dream and reality in a manner resembling Vincent van Gogh's timeless painting *Starry Night*.

Not surprisingly in this period of accusations of sexual harassment, Winfrey called for justice in a culture "broken by brutally powerful men." Women must speak the truth to the power of these men. Though it did not propose a run for office, Winfrey's speech ignited interest in her as a potential presidential candidate. However, not all women celebrities took a similar critical view of men, and some argued a more measured and precise standpoint.

Particularly more temperate than Winfrey were the comments of Catherine Deneuve, the beautiful and wealthy French actress, an icon of French culture, the official face of Marianne, France's national symbol of liberty. She took the lead of more than 100 French women in a public letter in *Le Monde* in implicit criticism of the Me Too movement and its French equivalent. Her argument is that using social media to discuss sexual misconduct, the Me Too movement has gone too far by publicly prosecuting private experiences and is stifling sexual freedom. Some men she held are being unfairly punished.

Deneuve did agree that rape is a crime, but held that insistent or clumsy flirting is not a crime, nor is gallantry

a chauvinist aggression. Though critics of Deneuve hold she may have been lobotomized, she holds that liberation of speech has been turned on its head.

Two powerful women have spoken, one more politically ambitious than the other. The question arises whether they can or should be taken more seriously as commentators than non-celebrities? The world of politics is not the continuation or implementation of a film or TV show. It is true that people from the world of entertainment have occasionally occupied high office in the U.S. as elsewhere as with Silvio Berlusconi in Italy. The prime example as U.S. president is Ronald Reagan, but he was prepared to some degree by having been the president of the Screen Actor's Guild and twice Governor of California.

Obviously celebrity works for material advantage. A recent amusing non political example is of the popular Canadian rapper Drake using his fame to push sales of his whiskey company, the Bourbon Virginia Black, launched in 2016, by offering shares to investors. More seriously, the U.S. is familiar with views of entertainment celebrities on public issues, like Jimmy Kimmel, late night talk host, speaking on health policy issues, or Robert de Nero, Meryl Streep, or Stephen Colbert, on a variety of issues.

This use of celebrity is not limited to the U.S. In Liberia the distinguished soccer star George Weah is elected president of the country. The movie star Joseph Estrada became mayor, senator, vice president and then president of the Phillipines, 1998-2001. Gina Lolobrigida, international sex symbol, ran briefly though unsuccessfully for office, a seat in the European Parliament.

But the number of celebrities from various fields in the U.S. interested in the highest office, much larger than ambitious counterparts abroad, is alarmingly high, some more plausible than others. In the crowded field there are already Howard

Schultz, former CEO of Starbucks, Mark Zuckerberg, co-founder and CEO of Facebook, Dwayne Johnson, the Rock, charismatic actor and wrestler, seriously considering a run, without naming a political party, but who wants "to serve the people and create a better environment for them," Robert Ritchie aka Kid Rock, and Tim McGraw, the country singer interested in Tennessee politics.

Most straightforward is Kanye West, the highly successful rapper and entrepreneur who has announced twice his run for U.S. president. He confesses he has no real views on politics, but "I just have a view on humanity, on people, and on the truth." Potential voters for West might remember that at various times he has compared himself to a variety of people, past and present, including Leonardo da Vinci, Shakespeare, Adolf Hitler, and Picasso. This may appear amusing or absurd, but so once did the candidacy of the professional wrestler Jesse Ventura, who became Governor of Minnesota, 1999-2003.

An axiom of the political world is that one can campaign in poetry, but one must govern in prose, able to deal with the multitude of complex policy issues, expected and unexpected, and prepared for the inevitable compromises that are needed to get policy agreement. Common sense demands a minimum of experience in political, economic, or military office.

There are two fundamenal issues with celebrity contenders. Do they have concrete or coherent policies to deal with the multiple issues they would confront if in power, and are they sufficiently flexible politically and intellectually to deal with the unexpected which always happens?

Two recent events may illustrate the way in which rulers need to exhibit compromise, flexibility, and judgement. One was the gesture by French President Emmanuel Macron in his visit on January 9, 2018 to Beijing, where he spoke briefly in Mandarin, and presented Chinese president Xi with an 8 year old horse, Vesususius, perhaps subtly reminding the Chinese that

a horse may overcome dragons. The other is the surprising change in policy of President Trump that he intends to attend the meeting in Davos, the meeting in the Swiss Alps of the world's business executive leaders, and wealthy corporate executives, which he has hitherto belittled.

One can admire the achievements of Oprah Winfrey and others in the entertainment world, but the celebrity achieved there does not warrant shaping our politics or suggest their suitability or adequacy for the highest political office in the U.S.