

## **Sorry I couldn't be here: performative celebrity meltdown and para-stardom**

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### **Abstract**

The star persona is a highly crafted and carefully managed identity. Stars often call attention to the impact of this construction on their own sense of being, acknowledging a difference between what Erving Goffman (1956) termed their public 'presentation of self' and their private self or what George Herbert Mead (1967) referred to as the *Me* and the *I*. It is evident in Cary Grant's oft-quoted quip 'Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant' or Marilyn Monroe's admission 'I never wanted to be Marilyn -- it just happened. Marilyn's like a veil I wear over Norma Jean'. Such comments are by no means rare and indicate a level of knowingness and self-awareness about the nature of star and celebrity identity. But what can we make of those instances where these questions of identity, authenticity and the self are self-directed, played out in extended form, where that awareness becomes existential questioning and culminates in an apparent public 'meltdown'? Considering the framing of the public behaviours of Hollywood actors Joaquin Phoenix in 2008-2009, Shia LaBeouf in 2013-2014 and Jim Carrey in 2017 as meltdown, this article explores explicit and public rejections of their established personas as they seek to navigate the contemporary star and celebrity landscape in the digital age, a landscape shaped by immediacy, temporariness, virality and multiple presentations of self. These case studies invite us to reassess the meltdown in the contemporary period to consider it not as an incident or event necessitating rehabilitation but as part of a process of reconfiguration -- of the star and the self. They ask whether it is possible for the star to rework their persona and take control over their image in a contemporary celebrity culture where control appears to be impossible.

## **Introduction**

The construction and maintenance of the star persona is highly crafted and carefully managed. Stars often call attention to the impact of this construction on their own sense of being, acknowledging a difference between what Erving Goffman (1956) termed their public ‘presentation of self’ and their private self or what George Herbert Mead (1967) referred to as the *Me* and the *I*. It is evident in Cary Grant’s oft-quoted quip ‘Everyone wants to be Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant’ or Marilyn Monroe’s admission ‘I never wanted to be Marilyn -- it just happened. Marilyn’s like a veil I wear over Norma Jean’. Such comments are by no means rare and indicate a level of knowingness and self-awareness about the nature of star and celebrity identity. But what can we make of those instances where these questions of identity, authenticity and the self are self-directed, played out in extended form, where that awareness becomes existential questioning and culminates in an apparent public ‘meltdown’? Considering the framing of the public behaviours of Hollywood actors Joaquin Phoenix in 2008-2009, Shia LaBeouf in 2013-2014 and Jim Carrey in 2017 as meltdown, this article explores explicit and public rejections of their established personas as they seek to navigate the contemporary star and celebrity landscape in the digital age, a landscape shaped by immediacy, temporariness, virality and multiple presentations of self. These case studies invite us to reassess the meltdown in the contemporary period to consider it not as an incident or event necessitating rehabilitation but as part of a process of reconfiguration -- of the star and the self. They ask whether it is possible for the star to rework their persona and take control over their image in a contemporary celebrity culture where control appears to be impossible. They ask what it means for a star to ‘be here’ now.

### **The ‘temporary’ contemporary meltdown event**

The term ‘meltdown’ has a relatively short history, with the earliest citations dating back to ice-cream manufacturers in the 1930s and the term gained popularity in the 1950s in reference to nuclear power (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In its current usage, it is most commonly employed to refer to system failure, financial collapse, global warming, the ‘peak’ moment of intensity in a behavioural cycle (particularly in reference to autism spectrum disorders) and, increasingly, displays of excessive behaviour by stars and celebrities. While

referring to vastly different events, the use of meltdown in each instance points to something that breaks down or comes apart in a public and apparently irreparable way. It is an explosive emergency that requires immediate attention and intervention. Language and linguistics scholar Philip Durkin explains how ‘to melt’ and ‘to cause to melt’ have merged in form and meaning in modern English to become homonyms; while spelled and pronounced the same, ‘to melt’ and ‘to cause to melt’ have essentially become the same term (Durkin 2009, pp.79-80). While this might appear to be splitting hairs, the double meaning has interesting implications in considering star and celebrity meltdown if we are to consider not just the meltdown moment but also what or who may have caused or instigated it and what happens next. Tellingly, while considerations of meltdown in the contexts of system failure, financial collapse, global warming and autism often place as much emphasis on the *cause* and *consequence* of meltdown in order to propose strategies for avoiding another in future or be better prepared to handle the next one when it occurs, media reports of celebrity meltdown overwhelmingly focus on the meltdown *event*.

As John Fiske notes the media event ‘is not a mere representation of what happened, but has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it’ (Fiske 1996, p.2). With rapidly spreading news to be deconstructed and interpreted by journalists and social commentators in a ‘continuous process of making sense and of circulating it socially’, the meltdown is presented as media event at ‘a point of maximum discursive visibility [and] a point of maximum turbulence’ (1996, pp.6-8). As a *social media* event, videos and images of transgressive behaviour ‘go viral’ as fans and audiences participate, watching in disbelief, sharing and speculating: What are they doing? Are they having a nervous breakdown? Have they ‘lost it’ or ‘gone mad’? The lexicon is frequently framed in terms of sanity and insanity, albeit often with little genuine concern for mental health. Questions are asked about the perceived recovery: Will they even be able to recover? What damage will the event have on their reputation, on their next film? Via social media, the meltdown event’s reach is amplified and immediate. ‘[T]he immediacy of seeing and hearing a celebrity caught “off guard” offers an arguably more visceral experience than any print material could possibly offer’, Kirsty Fairclough argues (2008). Yet, the event is more temporary and more fleeting as we experience a digitised communication culture characterised by the ‘rapid delivery’ and ‘ubiquitous availability’ of information (Tomlinson

2007, p.74). The ‘train-wreck’ celebrity, in other words, becomes ‘everyday fodder’ (Fairclough 2008).

This is particularly evident in the media treatment of female celebrity meltdown. In their content analysis of celebrity news stories, Valérie Gorin and Annik Dubied consider meltdown to be ‘a new kind of macro-story: those depicting film stars’ fall from grace through wayward behaviour and excesses [that is] characteristic of modern, contemporary celebrities, especially among young female stars’, such as Britney Spears, Kate Moss, Amy Winehouse and Lindsay Lohan (2011, p.613). While I am not convinced the meltdown narrative appears with any more frequency for female or male celebrities -- high-profile male actors Alec Baldwin, Christian Bale, Nicolas Cage, Russell Crowe, Tom Cruise, Robert Downey Jr., Mel Gibson and Charlie Sheen are a prominent feature of ‘best celebrity meltdown’ lists -- there is a palpable difference in the way such stories are presented to us. As Fairclough, Diane Negra and Su Holmes (2011) and Sarah Projansky (2014) have all argued, female celebrities are regularly treated differently to male celebrities in media coverage, subjected to deeper levels of scrutiny, vitriol and ‘spectacularization’ (Projansky 2014, p.5). ‘[F]emale celebrities are unsurprisingly held to different and more exacting standards than their male counterparts’, Fairclough notes in her perceptive analysis of celebrity gossip and ‘bitch culture’ (2008). For Nina K. Martin, this gendered double standard is evidenced in Bale, Cruise and Downey Jr.’s swift ‘return’ to the Hollywood fold following their respective meltdowns. ‘Overcoming scandal is often treated as forgivable or even heroic for men’ and they ‘are given multiple chances to recover and rehabilitate themselves through a purposeful refocusing back on their “work” and away from their personal lives’ (Martin 2015, pp.30-31).

Historically, serious challenges to a star’s persona often led to their effective and careful removal from the star system, such as in the case of the Roscoe Arbuckle scandal where the perceived transgression ‘virtually destroyed his power as a celebrity sign’ (Marshall 2014, pp.105-106).<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about star scandals, whereby stars engage in behaviour that challenges their position as ‘idealizations of ways of being/acting, embodying social types and norms’ (Dyer 1979, p.53). Reflecting on the rape allegations levelled at Arbuckle as well as Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford’s affair in the 1920s, Richard deCordova argued that ‘the star scandals represent a radical break with the terms of previous star

discourse [...] the scandals appeared as a crisis within the industry' (deCordova 1990, pp.128-9). Star scandals extended the 'play of surface and depth [that] characterized all discourse on stars' so that stars were revealed as 'flattering (but fictional) images' behind which 'lay a real world of moral turpitude' (1990 p.131). While scandal might have the power to expose something significantly and systemically amiss in the industry -- such as the more recent Harvey Weinstein scandal and #MeToo movement -- Gorin and Dubied's content analysis of news stories reveals contemporary meltdown is often perceived as the individual experiencing 'temporary troubles', rarely considered to have any impact outside the career of the individual star and celebrity 'and so explained away'. Framed as temporary and individual, 'their power to subvert is therefore limited', they conclude (2011, p.616). While presented as more fleeting and temporary than scandal, I want to propose that the meltdown extends beyond the individual, to comment on stardom and celebrity in the contemporary moment. The staying power of 'temporary troubles' has lasting repercussions for the star and celebrity persona as well as the industry that produces, sustains or -- in the case of the meltdown -- damages them.

In his essay 'Stardom, Celebrity and the Moral Economy of Pretending', Barry King (2015) sketches out a 'mixed reality continuum' from reality to virtuality in order to make sense of the star persona in the contemporary period, drawing on a prominent meltdown to make his distinction:

In terms of stars and celebrities, the notion of a real image outside of mediation is either a contradiction in terms or merely a logical possibility since stars and celebrities are always part of an augmented reality. [...] A star or celebrity may claim authenticity. But outside of major public meltdowns of the Mel Gibson variety, his or her professional persona is an expression of augmented reality (2015, p.327).

King is presumably referring to the American actor's numerous public outbursts, usually while intoxicated, such as his antisemitic and sexist outburst when arrested for driving under the influence, detailed in a leaked police report in 2006. Or his abusive expletive-filled phone conversation with then-girlfriend Oksana Grigorieva, leaked to the press in 2010. King's brief comment suggests that the public meltdown contains a reality or truth not generally revealed by the star and celebrity in the projection of their professional persona. Crucially,

the police report and phone call were leaked and then circulated online, providing evidence to support meltdown claims that, no doubt, Gibson would rather the public were not privy to.

The case of Gibson also refutes the notion of meltdown as ‘temporary trouble’. In the space of two years, the actor went from topping the Forbes ‘Celebrity 100’ list (ahead of Tiger Woods, Oprah Winfrey and Tom Cruise) to become a Hollywood pariah. He was dropped by his talent agency, a project he was developing for ABC was shelved by the studio, actors withdrew from his film projects or rallied to have him withdrawn from projects he was attached to and studio heads went on record to distance themselves from him (Biskind 2011). His ‘quiet blacklisting’ (Weiner 2014) lasted almost ten years and few reviews of his films since -- whether he is in front of or behind the camera -- fail to refer back to the star’s public meltdown. Speaking in 2016, Gibson expressed his annoyance that the incident from a decade before continued to come up in reviews and interviews:

I guess as who I am, I’m not allowed to have a nervous breakdown, ever [...] For me it’s a dim thing in the past [...] I don’t understand why after 10 years it’s any kind of issue [...] And for one episode in the back of a police car on eight double tequilas to sort of dictate all the work, life’s work and beliefs and everything else that I have and maintain for my life is really unfair (Tapley 2016).

Gibson’s comment suggests that when it comes to the lasting impact of the meltdown event, time does not heal all wounds. In spite of -- but also as a consequence of -- ‘the instantaneity of celebrity images and the ubiquity of our “search” culture’ (Marshall 2014, p.1), the meltdown event leaves a blemish on the star persona, becoming a celebrity signifier that can never be completely erased. With each new story, yesterday’s news may be old news but the meltdown event lingers and taints, periodically resurfacing to act as a reminder about the volatility of celebrity identity and about how far the celebrity has come since their public unravelling.

The question of what is real and what is augmented features prominently in the discussions circulating Joaquin Phoenix, Shia LaBeouf and Jim Carrey and their respective ‘meltdowns’. In each case, the actors demonstrate a sense of agency and conscious intervention in seeking to actively change their established persona. Ironically, this attempt to take control of their

persona and reconfigure it is read as the actor being out of control. Collectively and explicitly, Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey call attention to the meltdown as mediated and performative, performances carried out in pursuit of authenticity and 'truth', that reveal as much about the challenges facing the contemporary star as they do about the individual being read as experiencing a meltdown. Rather than being followed by a 'return' to stardom or process of 'rehabilitation' -- terms that are frequently employed to describe the ability of stars to distance themselves from the negative connotations of meltdown -- 'reconfiguration' acknowledges the new form the star takes, a form that emerges from the persona established prior to the meltdown event but is markedly altered from it.

### **The performative meltdown**

In October 2008, then two-time Oscar-nominated actor Joaquin Phoenix announced his retirement from acting, declaring 'I'm not doing films anymore... I'm done' and stating his intention to move into the music industry. News reports revealed Phoenix's brother-in-law Casey Affleck would be directing a documentary about the once-celebrated actor's attempt to re-brand himself as a rap artist. The following February, an awkward, dishevelled and disordered Phoenix appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* (1993-2015). The actor was apparently there to promote his latest and supposedly last film *Two Lovers* (2008), although he seemed unable to remember the name of his co-star or any detail about the film in which he appeared. The interview lasted less than 10 minutes, ending with a bemused and occasionally incredulous Letterman astutely remarking to the studio audience's delight: 'Joaquin, I'm sorry you couldn't be here tonight', calling attention to the perceived absence of Phoenix's established persona. In the press, Phoenix was subsequently described as 'troubled' and 'erratic' (Coleman 2009), a 'cuckoo' (Setoodeh 2009) and a 'train-wreck' (Adams 2009). Similarly, in late 2013, former Disney star, *Transformers* (2007) actor and BAFTA Rising Star Shia LaBeouf came under fire for plagiarising his short film that had premiered at Cannes the previous year and responded to the media backlash with apologetic statements that also turned out to be plagiarised. The following February, LaBeouf stormed out of a Berlin Film Festival press conference for Lars von Trier's *Nymph(om)aniac* (2013) after uttering the cryptic line first delivered by footballer Eric Cantona in 1995: 'When the seagulls follow the trawler it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea.' Later, on the red carpet, the 'volatile' (Gilbey 2014, p.56) 'Hollywood oddball' (Wise 2014,

p.13) wore a brown paper bag over his head with 'I am not famous anymore' scribed in black ink and with cut-out peepholes. LaBeouf wore the paper bag again a few days later, this time for an art installation titled #IAMSORRY at a Los Angeles gallery. In September 2017, a red-carpet incident featuring another actor went viral. In an interview at New York Fashion Week, two-time Golden Globe winner Jim Carrey, while circling *E! News*' Catt Sadler, said 'There's no meaning to any of this... I wanted to find the most meaningless thing that I could come to and join and here I am'. The stunned anchor speculated Carrey must have found enough meaning in the event to be so dressed up. 'I didn't get dressed up', the actor quickly responded, 'There is no me. There's just things happening [...] It's not our world. We don't matter'. For the press, this was another in a string of bizarre behaviours that pointed to a meltdown. Jim Carrey is 'notoriously Weird Even for a Celebrity', noted *The Guardian*'s Hadley Freeman' (Freeman 2017).

The three public appearances -- Phoenix on Letterman, LaBeouf at the Berlin Film Festival, Carrey at New York Fashion Week -- were all widely interpreted as indicating some kind of 'acting out' moment, immediately becoming meltdown events to be pored over, dissected, pitied or turned into memes. However, all three examples depart from more typical examples of male celebrity meltdown -- such as Gibson's, or Christian Bale's widely circulated rant at Director of Photography Shane Hurlbut on the set of *Terminator Salvation* (2009) -- wherein the actors' participation in the circulation of the 'meltdown' is more active. Gibson's antisemitic comments and abusive phone call and Bale's rant were documented and leaked to the press by people other than the stars while Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey's behaviours were wittingly carried out in front of the camera. Their behaviours were not private made public, they were knowingly public from the outset. What the actors could not anticipate nor control, however, was how their public behaviours would be received and read.

Taking place on a talk show, at a film festival, on the red carpet, the meltdown is given a very public stage. These are promotional spaces that ordinarily function as a platform for the star to further their brand, elevate their status and endorse their latest output. Instead, Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey utilise the respective spaces to challenge and confront those expectations. In each instance, the actors actively reject the established script or normative behaviour for a star, refusing to adhere to the promotional and presentational demands of contemporary celebrity culture. Being uncommunicative in a televised interview, wearing a



paper bag over one's head and philosophising on the red carpet on the nature of being are behaviours not in keeping with the expectations of the film promotional exercise. In turn, this nonconformism threatens to damage or even destroy the established star persona if it cannot be made sense of in the context of our existing knowledge about the star, sending the news media, fans, publicists and agents into a spin.

In all three cases, meltdown is framed in terms of performance. This is most clearly the case with Phoenix whereby meltdown was revealed to be a fabricated act, something played out before a mostly unwitting audience. In spite of some speculation to the contrary, Phoenix and Affleck maintained and frequently asserted *I'm Still Here* (2010) -- Affleck's film detailing Phoenix's apparent demise -- was not a hoax. Only after the film's US release (the day before the film was released in the UK), following a number of high-profile reviews of the film that reviewed it as a documentary,<sup>2</sup> did Affleck finally confirm that the film, and Phoenix's meltdown, were fictional: 'a terrific performance' (Cieply 2010, p.C1), 'a planned staged and scripted work of fiction' (Singh 2010). The fly-on-the-wall observational format, which has a lot in common with television's recent trend in scripted reality programming, reveals a slovenly and narcissistic Phoenix (or 'J.P.' as he refers to himself in the film) and his embarrassing attempt to break into the music industry. J.P. smokes, drinks and swears his way through the film and engages in multiple instances of grotesque, humiliating and lewd behaviour, not least of all snorting cocaine off a woman's breasts and being defecated on while sleeping by a vengeful personal assistant. J.P.'s appearance on *Letterman* is included in the film, as 'proof' of the actor's public downfall. The audience is a crucial part of the initial meltdown set-up, requiring their belief that it is decidedly not a performance in order for the act to be successful. Reviewed after the director's admission that the film was indeed fiction, the inclusion of the interview is a shrewd acknowledgement of the constructed nature of the celebrity image, becoming a performance-within-performance as Phoenix plays J.P. appearing as 'Joaquin Phoenix' on the chat show. That it was not universally recognised as a performance and many believed it to be true served to confirm the actor's talent in his ability to convince. In a profile of the actor for *The New York Times*, Bret Easton Ellis called *I'm Still Here* 'one of his finest performances' and confirmed his 'weird brilliance' (Ellis 2017). Rather than undermining the actor's skill and status, therefore, the performance-of-a-meltdown demonstrated and validated it.

While not explicitly offered up by the actors as meltdown, LaBeouf and Carrey's actions were offered up to the camera by the actor and subsequently interpreted as meltdown, read in relation to other meltdown narratives and events packaged and presented to them by the celebrity news media. LaBeouf contextualised his actions as performance art, a creative experiment. #IAMSORRY turned out to be the second in a series of (11, at the time of writing) projects on which LaBeouf collaborated with artists Luke Turner and Nastja Säde Rönkkö, titled using social media hashtags -- #METAMARATHON, #FOLLOWMYHEART and so on -- announced on the actor's Twitter feed and documented on a website.<sup>3</sup> #IAMSORRY and his later projects explicitly invite audience participation, whether responding to tweets and utilising hashtags, attending an art installation or watching the live stream of his film back catalogue. #IAMSORRY recalled two solo performance pieces by Serbian artist Marina Abramović: 'Rhythm O' (1974), in which the artist invited the public to interact with her choosing from 72 props including a gun and a bullet; and 'The Artist is Present' (2010), where Abramović silently sat for over 700 hours and participants were invited to sit across from her. For #IAMSORRY, LaBeouf sat silently, paper bag over his head, in a room with a table decorated with props associated with the actor's onscreen performances, including an Indiana Jones-style whip, *Transformers* toys, a bowl of malicious tweets and the source material for his plagiarised short film. While the props were decidedly less perilous than those chosen by Abramović, LaBeouf later revealed that he was raped during the installation, an admission met with scepticism and ridicule in news reports. In spite of the framing of his projects as performance art, the press were reluctant to take the actor seriously, calling attention to the 'troubled' LaBeouf's 'bizarre' behaviour and frequent arrests and charges for drunk and disorderly conduct (see Hawkes 2015).

One of the biggest box-office stars of the 1990s, 'fall from grace' narratives have regularly circulated around Carrey since the late 1990s. Carrey's more recent performative meltdown is widely speculated to have been triggered by the suicide of ex-girlfriend Cathriona White in 2015, which very publicly saw him caught up in a wrongful-death lawsuit. Carrey's existential musing on the red carpet is just one many instances whereby the actor has shared his philosophical outlook with interviewers and a public audience, including junkets and chat shows. In 2017, the release of two documentaries featuring Carrey once again invited questions about the actor's sanity: the short film *I Needed Color*, released on video hosting website Vimeo in July, documents Carrey's life-long passion for art, which he has been fully

embracing through expansive paintings and murals that fill his Los Angeles home; and *Jim & Andy: The Great Beyond*, released on streaming service Netflix in November, detailing Carrey's immersion into the character of Andy Kaufman for Miloš Forman's biographical drama *Man on the Moon* (2010), a performance from which Carrey refused to break for the duration of the production. Similar to LaBeouf, the celebrity and news media repeatedly narrativise these as examples of the actor being unhinged, rather than confirmation of the actor's intense commitment to his art form. 'Meltdown' is a familiar frame of reference to make sense of these out-of-character, acting out moments. Performance art and existential exploration appear to be much more difficult to comprehend.

The actions and behaviours can also be contextualised as attempts by the actors to make sense of their star and celebrity personas and to distinguish themselves from their previous roles and personas. For Phoenix, *I'm Still Here* and his meltdown was an opportunity to 'try something f----- different' (Godfrey 2014). The actor has spoken about the film in positive terms in numerous interviews. In 2012, he told Elvis Mitchell, that he found the experience 'unbelievably liberating': 'doing that movie was one of the best things that I've done and that I'll ever do [...] It's the best thing I've ever done in terms of helping me grow as an actor and having a deeper appreciation for acting', although he admitted he was worried it might have a negative impact on his reputation as an actor (Mitchell 2012). In the same interview, he articulated a desire to distance himself from some of his earlier roles: 'I just didn't want to do that kind of acting anymore', he noted, referring to his roles in Hollywood blockbusters. Phoenix has spoken about his struggle with such high-profile films before. Referring to *Walk the Line* (2005), for which he received his second Academy Award nomination for his portrayal of country singer Johnny Cash, the actor noted that after the film 'I went through confusion and depression. After a film like this, I lose those things that help define me and make me comfortable. I go through this thing of, "What am I? What do I do?" [...] I don't want anything else that comes with acting, like the fame or the so-called perks' (cited in Howden 2011, p.203). He reiterated later that he considered *I'm Still Here* to be 'terribly humiliating' but also '[a]n amazing experience: not finding your light, not hitting the mark, not memorizing lines. It allowed me to be bold in my decisions instead of being safe' (Ellis 2017). *I'm Still Here* for the actor was an experimental and creative venture, allowing freedom from the constraints of the studio picture but also freedom from the pressures of

adhering to the proscribed image of how a Hollywood leading man and A-list celebrity should act.

LaBeouf has discussed in numerous interviews his ‘metamodern’ pursuit of a ‘new sincerity’ in his acting, wanting to take ‘risks’ in his performances and to distance himself from the ‘irrelevant’ blockbuster films he was making (Horowitz 2016, see also Turner 2015). Once speculated to become ‘the Next Tom Hanks’ by *Vanity Fair* (Hogan 2008, p.116), he has described himself as getting ‘itchy’ in Hollywood and then found himself ‘in the middle of identity exploration in a very public way’ (Horowitz 2016). LaBeouf is forthcoming in interviews about his work and articulates an acute awareness of his status as a celebrity but that also jars with his own sense of self and desire to be taken seriously as an actor and artist. His performance projects can be considered collectively as an attempt to unpack his celebrity in order to understand it, working through his dissatisfaction with the direction in which his career was going and a search for something more meaningful in art and film. ‘I turned to performance art as I couldn’t find another container/platform/discipline for individual expression, self-presentation’, he has stated, ‘It liberates me’ (Setoodeh 2015). LaBeouf has shown himself to be an actor who is not afraid to put himself ‘out there’ and poke fun at his celebrity. This risks permanent damage to his previously established Hollywood persona yet that appears to be the intention, even if it leads to ridicule.

Following Carrey’s red-carpet outing, the actor participated in numerous written and video interviews discussing his worldview and seemed keen to go on record that his recent behaviours were not evidence of mental collapse or depression -- which the actor has spoken about experiencing in the past -- but quite the opposite: he had never been more at peace or had more mental clarity. For Carrey, the message is less about wanting to distance himself from his earlier roles than for his identity as ‘Jim Carrey’ to be acknowledged as a role as much as any of his screen characters: ‘Jim Carrey was a less intentional character because I thought I was just building something that people would like but it was a character’, he told an interviewer at Toronto Film Festival, ‘I played the guy who was free from concerns so the people who watched were free from concerns’ (TIFF Long Take 2017). Carrey’s questioning of self both on and offscreen has been going on for decades. As Vivian Sobchack observes in her excellent analysis of the star performer, ‘Carrey consistently points to and understands himself as *nothing less yet also something more* than a completely exteriorized and textual

being born of mass-mediated culture' (Sobchack 2004, p.289). In both *The Truman Show* (1998) and *The Majestic* (2001), Carrey's characters choose real life over the contrived and constructed reality of fame and celebrity. 'Fortunately for us', Mark Simpson noted at the end of his review of the latter film, 'the real Jim Carrey is never likely to make that choice' (Simpson 2002). However, with his existential questioning, the actor appears to be exercising his choice to do exactly that.

### **Stars deconstructing stardom**

Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey's behaviours share an intention to deconstruct celebrity culture and their actions can be read collectively as critical and metatextual commentaries on the nature of celebrity culture. In fabricating a story around celebrity meltdown and maintaining that story for an extended period of time, the success of Phoenix's performance required the news media to accept his public undoing as real, to circulate the story as a star in disarray. As Casey Affleck explained to Roger Ebert following the admission that *I'm Still Here* was fictional: 'We obsess about celebrities. We create them, build myths around them, and then hunt them and destroy them' (Ebert 2010b). In the film, J.P. rants: 'I'm just fucking, like, stuck in this ridiculous, like, self-imposed fucking prison of characterization [...] I don't want to play the character of Joaquin anymore'.

Beyond the screen, all three actors have been open in their criticisms of celebrity obsession and the fickle, constructed nature of the industry. Prior to the awards circuit that would see Phoenix receive a raft of nominations -- including a third Oscar nomination -- for his performance in Paul Thomas Anderson's *The Master* (2012), the actor dismissed the awards circuit as 'total, utter bullshit and I don't want to be a part of it'. 'It's a carrot', he told Elvis Mitchell, 'but it's the worst-tasting carrot I've ever tasted in my whole life... I just don't ever want to get comfortable with that part of things' (Mitchell 2012). LaBeouf has referred to the celebrity as 'an enslaved body': 'the craft of acting for film is terribly exclusive and comes with the baggage of celebrity, which robs you of your individuality and separates you', he told one interviewer (Setoodeh 2015). This denunciation of celebrity and all its trappings is played out in Phoenix, Carrey and LaBeouf's respective meltdown events, demonstrated in Letterman's 'I'm sorry you couldn't be here tonight' remark, LaBeouf's 'I am not famous anymore' paper-bag dictum, Carrey's 'there is no me' matter-of-fact revelation. All three

statements question the existence of the self in celebrity culture and present the celebrity as a wholly constructed identity.

In their reflections on the nature of their identity as actors and celebrities, Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey articulate an awareness of themselves as images that are constructed, presented and circulated. Their meltdown moments -- whether publicly performed and presented or not -- can be read as a rejection or retaliation against their celebrity identity where they are 'caught in the collapse of the public/private and are often forced to be continually in role, as media beings' (Redmond 2006, p.34). While each actor has actively sought to contextualise the moments as something other than meltdown, their justifications hardly seem to matter; collectively their 'bizarre' behaviours and transgressive actions continue to be read and interpreted as moments of meltdown, of disarray and collapse. This is evident in the best/biggest/truly spectacular celebrity meltdowns lists that frequently circulate online. Such lists suggest it is less important whether the meltdown is 'real' or not than how authentically it is presented, that it is in keeping with the now-familiar narratives of meltdown.

Even after announcing its fabrication, artistic or philosophical intention, critics and fans continued to debate what truth there was in each meltdown. The 'detective game' did not cease once the meltdown was revealed as act or contextualised as performance art or existential philosophising. 'Belief is unnecessary for the pleasure of gossip,' Joshua Gamson writes, 'The "real self", so central in traditional decoding positions is not critical to the activity' (Gamson 1994, p.174). The narrative then shifts to determining what truth there is in the apparent meltdown. For it to have been believed and interpreted as such to begin with suggests the meltdown always needs to have some basis in truth for it to be read as authentic. For Phoenix, the skill in which he convincingly portrays meltdown is contextualised in relation to his 'real-life' experiences. He is the reluctant star, 'unpredictable' (Shoard 2012) and 'recalcitrant' (Hirschberg 2014) interviewee, already associated with scandal as a result of a notoriously unconventional childhood, being the brother of 'tragic star' River Phoenix and having a much-publicised spell in rehab for alcohol abuse. LaBeouf's comments and behaviours are framed as wanting to be taken seriously as an adult actor, as distinct from his child actor origins and Hollywood franchise days. His performance pieces are read alongside his numerous arrests for drunk and disorderly conduct as confirmation of the former child actor going 'off the rails'. Carrey's comments on the nature of being are read as playful and

comedic, confirmation of the perpetual funny man's 'weird' schtick and 'loony intensity' (Maslin 1997).

Once associated with meltdown, the star persona is impacted to the extent that the star can never fully escape its clutches and is forever tainted. Phoenix's brand only seems to have strengthened since associations with meltdown. The actor has been sought out for more challenging and complex roles, predominantly outside of the mainstream, by filmmakers known for their creativity, artistic prowess and unconventionality such as Gus Van Sant, Lynne Ramsay, Paul Thomas Anderson and Spike Jonze. For Ramsay, Phoenix is 'instinctual and unpredictable' (Brooks 2018). Jonze apparently cast Phoenix as a result of seeing him in Affleck's film, suggesting the performance-of-a-meltdown revealed a 'compelling' side to the actor not witnessed before (Godfrey 2014). Rather than being able to 'shed its negative effects immediately afterward' (Martin 2015, p.31), *I'm Still Here* and Phoenix's performative meltdown have markedly shaped his persona and subsequent career. While acknowledging the importance of the film in changing his career trajectory, the persistent focus on Affleck's film by interviewers since has clearly started to grate and demonstrates the staying power of the meltdown narrative. 'I am so fucking sick about talking about that', Phoenix noted recently, 'No other film I've been in I have been asked so much about' (Clarke 2018).

Like Phoenix, the performative meltdown extends to LaBeouf and Carrey's fictional characterisations. Indeed, a number of the roles the actors have taken on following their respective meltdown events add to this narrative of persona reconfiguration. *I'm Still Here* is the exemplar here: a fiction masquerading as a documentary that shows Phoenix as J.P. renouncing and distancing himself from his established star persona as an acting professional, setting up a new persona that is the antithesis of the polished media icon. For LaBeouf, this renouncement is played out in a series of shorts that the actor was experimenting with prior to his #IAMSORRY project -- in his performances in Sigur Rós's 'Fjögur píanó' (2012) and interpretive dance in Sia's 'Elastic Heart' (2015) music videos and Rob Cantor's 'Shia LaBeouf Live' (2014) and as narrator of the short film *Everyday Performance Artists* (2016) -- and in his feature film performances in *The Necessary Death of Charlie Countryman* (2013), 'real' sex in *Nymph()maniac vol. 1 and 2* (2013) and *American Honey* (2016). Taken collectively, there is something masochistic about LaBeouf's performances in these films and

videos. Like his performance art hashtag projects, LaBeouf is asking to be taken seriously as a credible artist, to be accepted as more than a star of a Hollywood blockbuster franchise. They present an actor taking risks, exposing himself and inviting criticism. It is something LaBeouf has articulated is the case in his performance art but is clearly also evident in these film and video roles.

In the Showtime drama *Kidding* (2018-), Carrey's first fictional outing following his red-carpet meltdown, the actor plays a children's television presenter whose recent bereavement and subsequent divorce cause him to question his identity. In the pilot episode, Jeff a.k.a. Mr Pickles wants to use his children's show to address difficult issues such as death and loss. His producer, who also happens to be his father (Frank Langella), tells him: 'The show can't change. You can't change. That's why you're still around... You're a minted image. You're a trusted brand... You change one little thing, and you going to force a conversation with the audience they don't want to have'. While Jeff is presented as a quirky oddball, very early on the comedy-drama asks us to consider if his unconventional way of viewing the world might actually make more sense than we initially thought. Jeff appears sure of himself, confident in his awakening but the industry and audience will need some convincing.

## Conclusion

In considering the concept of the meltdown in relation to the changing state of the star and celebrity, it is worth drawing from the late philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor of 'liquidity' to describe modern life:

While solids have clear spatial dimensions [...] fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but 'for a moment' (Bauman 2000, p.2).

The state of being liquid, Bauman argued, was an apt way of thinking about the present, which he saw as characterised by rapid change and uncertainty. In a later study, Bauman noted 'celebrities are so comfortably at home in the liquid modern setting: liquid modernity is their natural ecological niche' (2005, p.50).<sup>4</sup> Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey stand out as



different in this regard. On the one hand, their performances communicate a *discomfort* for the contemporary star and celebrity setting; their behaviours and commentaries can be read as a response to this setting, an articulation of distaste for the celebrity machine that they perceive as shallow and restrictive. On the other hand, their behaviours communicate a desire to change their personas and demonstrate some agency in how it is shaped, which would make them exemplars of celebrity in the context of liquid modernity. All three actors share a sense of their self -- who/what/where am I? -- being up for grabs. They repeatedly question their purpose, the point of the image that has been constructed, with an urgency to call it into question and to consider its validity. This corresponds with meltdown in its truest sense: the idea that something has been melted down and takes on a new form. Essentially, it is still the same person, with the same characteristics but the form and fabric of the star have irrevocably changed. Meltdown in this context is revealed as much more complex than collapse or breakdown or implosion, less a point of decline or coming apart than a state of heightened awareness preceding adaptive change. The final irony is that in attempting to distance themselves from celebrity culture, deemed so toxic that it needs to be ridiculed, berated and exposed as meaningless their performative meltdowns instead solidify their position within it. This creates what I would term a para-stardom.

The performative meltdown reveals something unintentional that 'slips out' that cannot be controlled, in spite of the conscious and active part played by each actor. In this way, we might usefully consider meltdown as parapraxis; an unconscious slippage that reveals something truthful. As cultural commentator Malcolm Gladwell has observed, 'Mistakes reveal our vulnerabilities. They are the way the world understands us' (Gladwell 2018). These examples also reveal something about us in the repeated desire to reject each actor's attempts to contextualise their behaviour and continue to frame unconventional and transgressive behaviours by stars and celebrities as meltdowns, temporary transgressions and moments of madness to be managed and recovered from. It seems it is easier for us to believe that the questions each actor raises about the nature and meaning of identity and the self in this current time point to moments of insanity rather than sanity. Unlike the private, explosive and emotive rants that are leaked or paparazzi photographs of dishevelled stars in physical disarray that are made public, Phoenix, LaBeouf and Carrey's meltdowns are distinctly brought into the realm of the star system by the star themselves, desperate to be disassociated from a commercial machine they perceive as lacking integrity and constantly attempting to

control their identity and public persona. This para-stardom, informed by the performative meltdown, is one that becomes recognisably marginal while remaining very visible, one that presents a heightened reflective awareness of acting and performance in popular culture and is part of their public presentation of self, and one that responds to the system with an intellectually informed meta-textual approach to craft as art. In short, these kinds of meltdowns reveal the inadequacies of stardom through the public performance of critiques that are self-sacrificing and self-determined.

### Notes on contributor

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent discussion of the Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle scandal see deCordova 1990, pp.117-150.

<sup>2</sup> From the outset, fans and critics alike debated the authenticity of the meltdown. Roger Ebert, who by his own admission 'fell for it', tallied the positions of 30 major critics and publications, noting that 9 believed the film was real, 18 were 'not sure, open question or cagey' and 6 declared it was a fake: 'As a documentary it is the sad record of a man lost in the wilderness of drugs, ego and narcissism. As a fake documentary -- a fiction film - it is a rather awe-inspiring record of a piece of high-risk performance art played out in public by Phoenix and Affleck over more than a year' (Ebert 2010a).

<sup>3</sup> Previously [thecampaignbook.com](http://thecampaignbook.com) (LaBeouf's Twitter handle), the website has since been renamed [labeoufronkoturner.com](http://labeoufronkoturner.com)

<sup>4</sup> For more on the concept of liquidity in relation to celebrity, see Sean Redmond (2010 and 2014).