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What Happened to the Movie Star?

A true *star* floats above all others on Earth, seemingly existent in their own separate universe. They shine bright against the stark black of the night sky, but what happens when more light floods the sky? When a whole new universe filled with other stars and planets rotates into view? Over time, the black turns to gray, and even the brightest stars begin to dim. Over the last century, this is the process that began to occur in Hollywood. What once was a space only occupied by a select few stars of the silver screen became crowded with new movie stars and television personalities. Western, horror, and romance film stars gained celebrity status. As years passed, reality television, sitcom, and serial drama stars joined their ranks. The pitch black of the night sky brightened as visual media rose to become the most popular form of entertainment in America, inadvertently drowning out its stars. Beginning as a clearly valuable asset, the celebrity name in a credits roll has begun to lose its influence over box office success over the course of the 20th century. By analyzing the six-decade-long career of actress and model Barbara Stanwyck, I will demonstrate how the power of celebrity status has been altered and diluted via the increasing prevalence of visual media in American society.

Celebrities are often disregarded as a fickle and insignificant part of society, but the money that flows around them is not without consequence. In 1944, Barbara Stanwyck made the modern equivalent of $7.1 million for her role in *Double Indemnity*. The price of hiring on celebrity talent has only increased in the decades following. “Movies themselves are enormous

financial bets," writes Harvard Business professor Anita Elberse, and the high prices of celebrity names only add to the monetary weight of these bets. In her article analyzing the ability of star actors to drive the success of movies, Elberse notes that stars "including Jim Carrey, Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks, Brad Pitt, and Julia Roberts, have been paid salaries as high as $25 million per picture". These high fees make hiring on celebrity talent no small decision, especially as rates have increased over time. This raises the question: do modern stars hold more influence over the box office than stars of the past? And further, what evidence exists to make investors believe that these celebrities are worth betting millions on?

Born Ruby Stevens, Barabara Stanwyck began working at the age of 13. By 15, she was a chorus girl, dancing and touring the US. At 19, she made her Broadway debut in *The Noose*. While during this time she adopted her stage name, it wasn't until a year later in 1927 that her career launched as the lead in *Burlesque.* Her dazzling performance as Jane Brew earned her first movie offers. Over the next quarter-century, she would go on to act in more than 80 films, earning multiple Academy Award nominations for films such as *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Double Indemnity* (1944), and *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948). Beginning in the 1960s, she transitioned in television, where she found even more substantial critical acclaim, winning Emmys for her involvement in the western series, *Big Valley* (1966), *The Barbara Stanwyck Show* (1960), and *Thorn Birds* (1982). She was an American icon in her heyday, often described as an actress who was "at ease in every genre"(Haskell). Her tragic childhood, defined by the death of her mother and the poignant absence of her father, is frequently cited as the reason she so successfully portrayed the "morally dubious dames" of her early films (Haskell). At the peak of her career in the 1940s and 50s, Stanwyck's name on a credits roll helped to push her films towards box office

success. The success of her later works were defined more so by their merit, rather than any one actor or actress' attachment to the project.

As the century turned, and technologies sharpened, film began to establish itself as a common form of entertainment. The transition from film as a sort of spectacle into a real, viable industry was aided by the actors and actresses who began to attain celebrity status. These stars developed large followings that drove demand for new films, resulting in box office numbers that made it apparent that film was to become a lucrative industry. By 1930, "more than 2 million patrons were entertained" each day at Publix theaters, the dominant movie theater chain across the American South and a few mid-western states as well (Gomery). Movies are an experienced good, meaning they must be paid for and experienced before a customer can decide if they actually liked the product. Without television or the internet to air trailers, posters were the only way to convince audiences to go out and see the film. For this reason, celebrities became a vital part of marketing for new films. Beloved actors and actresses served as markers of quality, signifying their respective films as worthy of the cost of a ticket. At this time, the name "Barbara Stanwyck" held little significance to moviegoers, as she was just beginning her on-screen career. "Her first two — self-admitted — disastrous films" did poorly at the box office and were largely abandoned to history (AFI). While Stanwyck was far from influential at this point in time, names like Florence Lawrence, Charlie Chaplin, and Mary Pickford drew large crowds to the theaters during the early 1900s. Celebrities like them transformed the future of film. Their names gave audiences a reason to return to theaters as the fascination with the new technology of moving pictures began to wear off.

As years passed, and technologies improved, film only grew in its popularity as a pastime. For teenagers especially, "movies were it" (Fleming). Going out to the movies for the

evening was a date night activity, something to dress up for. The stars people went to go see practically only existed on the big screen, and their public image beyond the screen was meticulously curated by the production companies they were signed to. Because of this, celebrities seemed bigger. Marketing teams controlled their client's public images so tightly that to many the stars "were gods" (Fleming). The daunting size of film screens amplified the effects of this careful promotion. Not only did their stunning outfits and invitations to exclusive parties set them apart from the rest of the world, but their exclusive presence on the big screen made it seem as if they were truly larger than life. Unlike today where celebrities are much more accessible on social media and so much of their lives are on display for the masses to view, the stars that existed prior to the digital age were elusive. There were fewer levels of celebrity, as news outlets and magazines only had so much time and pages, meaning that time spent discussing celebrities was spent discussing only the biggest names in entertainment. The internet, in comparison, serves as a practically endless forum for news and discussion. Adding to this, gaining a following became much more accessible to the general public, meaning that more people could place some sort of claim to being famous. The endless flow of people seeking fame means that standing out becomes a much more difficult task. As the portion of the population that is deemed "famous" has become more saturated, the once-exclusive world of celebrity has begun to feel a lot more attainable, meaning that few stars today still hold onto the god-like status of the stars of the past.

For the world of entertainment, the middle of the century was largely defined by the popularization of television, a process that would begin in the fifties. Prior to the emergence of this new visual media platform, the fame of movie stars was nearly untouchable. In 1944, Barbara Stanwyck made a whopping $400,000 from her roles in movies alone, a number which

is equivalent to about $7.1 million dollars today (Baur). That year, “the Government listed her as the nation's highest-paid woman”(Flint). A few years later, televisions would begin to appear in the homes of the rich. By 1956 televisions were in “70 percent of the country’s homes”, and that number would only continue to rise as years passed (Allen). Despite this, at-home viewing options did not yet serve as a significant threat to the popularity of the movie-going experience. The large disparity of quality made the two experiences nearly incomparable for a brief moment. Even though videotape was not widely available until the 1960s, and thus had to film everything live, Hollywood still perceived television as a “threatening new medium” (Allen). While television began to bear its own stars, actors and actresses who moved from films to TV were “looked down upon” by many, meaning that they did not compete for the spotlight with the movie stars (Fleming). Television was considered a separate entity from the intricate productions that were available for viewing at the movie theater. The stars of the silver screen still stood out against the rising competition. Simultaneously though, at this point in time, the movie industry began to rely a little less heavily on star power in order to draw audiences in, and, ironically, found some more support from the television industry. New available marketing strategies meant that production companies could provide the public with sneak peeks of the movies as advertising during prime-time television. These short clips helped to pique the interest of consumers. Additionally, they provided a clearer image of what the movie was about, as well as its general aesthetics and themes. An increase in advertising for films during this time period made it more difficult to discern the cause of box office success for the movie.

With the development of new handheld cameras during the end of the century, filmmaking became more accessible than ever before. It was no longer reserved solely for the rich or for those who had financial backing from a production company. While production

became more affordable, distribution was still largely controlled by companies such as Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, and Warner Bros. Pictures to name a few. Despite the considerable decrease in production costs, indie filmmakers often still need financial support from individual investors or from a production company. One of the major ways in which modern indie films prove that their project is worth investing in is by securing celebrities' names for their project. Well-known actors are seen as providing “marquee appeal” and are considered crucial because they “give a certain assurance to investors that the movie will be a hit (even though this often turns out not to be the case)” (Rodriques). The conventional wisdom is that movies with celebrities in them are much more likely to be successful, after all, they were a key factor in film turning into an industry in the first place. Modern studies do little to support this theory, though. Established film data researcher Stephen Follows “noted an absence of any major star involvement” when he analyzed the types of low-budget films (those with a budget of $500,000 to $3 million) that make the most money (Rodriques). Studies like Follows’ are much more difficult to complete when analyzing high-budget studio films, but one 2004 study, which compared over 200 recent films reveals that “fewer than half of the highest-grossing hits featured an actor who had top billing in at least one hit movie previous” (Elberse). Some of the noted films included *Star Wars*, *E.T. the Extraterrestrial*, and *Titanic*. Studies such as these suggest that stars no longer hold the box-office influence they once did, but across the board, findings are mixed. Determining the precise impact of a celebrity on a film’s revenues is difficult. The root of this difficulty is borne from the inability of researchers to have a true “control” film to use in their research. Even if the same film were to be released, one with a celebrity, and one without, at the exact same time, the films would have to market in different spaces. This difference alone would mean that the “control” would have more than one variable being tested. The reality is

that a million different factors contribute to the success of a movie. From marketing strategies used, celebrity involvement, and genre, to time of year, health of the economy, and political stability, box office success is not determined by a singular factor. Patriotic films that found major success with the American public in the wake of 9/11 would likely have not seen the same revenue numbers if they were released during the social unrest that defined 2020. With conflicting evidence arising surrounding the influence of stars on box-office success, the justification behind paying millions for big names becomes unclear. The direct connection between celebrity involvement and box-office success has faded greatly since the start of the century, leaving studios with large tabs to pay, and often, little to show for it.

Modern technological advancements have arguably also contributed to how celebrities are viewed by the public. The advent of social media has meant that "the public broadcasting of daily life has become a routine and broadly accessible activity, rather than the preserve of a notable elite" (Gamson). By making the development of a following much more attainable for the general public, the once near-mythical lives of celebrities have begun to seem more in reach. One Rice University professor wrote that "[c]ontemporary fame has nothing to do with older notions of fame where fame represented some distinct and unusual accomplishment of the subject in whose name fame was produced" (Samuel). While many stars today still find success due to these older notions of distinct accomplishment, their fame is diminished by the nature of sharing the limelight with stars of contemporary fame. The lines between these groups have blurred as public relations and marketing teams have realized the relevance and power of advertising through social media. Virality is no longer being chased solely by average people on the internet. Brands, companies, and film promotion teams all seek to make their videos and posts "viral". The infectious nature of information on the modern internet is a double-edged

sword for movie advertisers, though. When it once took a few days for reviews, which in the 1930s largely consisted of notes on audience reactions, to hit newspapers, the public's opinion of a modern film is shared mere seconds after the first viewing is complete (Butsch). The rapid spread of reviews means that audiences now have three factors that may influence their choice to go see a film. The presence (or absence) of their favorite actors, their interest in the story themes, and the opinions of the general public now all influence one's decision to go and see a film. This means that, while celebrity names may initially serve as a marker of quality before a film's release, this notion can quickly change, affecting a film's box office trajectory. Quality has time and time again shown to be more important to audiences than a name in the credits. A recent example of this was the near-disastrous release of *Argylle* (2024). Despite having a star-studded cast, including names like Henry Cavill, John Cena, Samuel L. Jackson, and major studio backing, the film opened to only $17 million during its domestic debut (Sharf). The more rapid release of reviews means that the presence of an actor or actress' name in the credits is influential for a much shorter period of time than in the past. Adding on to this, the movie stars who once practically existed solely on the 40-plus-foot screens of movie theaters, now are primarily viewed on 5-inch phone screens. The digital age has meant that famous actors and actresses now both literally and figuratively seem smaller. This being said, the influence celebrities have over the general public is far from disappearing. For example, *Back to the Future* star Micheal J. Fox started a foundation which has raised "over $350 million USD for research seeking a cure for Parkinson's disease" (Hoffman). One marketing analytics company claimed that "just one endorsement can spell an increase in sales by 4% almost immediately"(Olenski). Stars' influence over the general public is largely derived from "people's desire to acquire celebrities' social capital" (Hoffman). This makes them great marketers of products, as

consumers will subconsciously view owning the same products as their favorite celebrity as a way to be more like them. In terms of film promotion, this power of tapping into people's innate desire for fame is a little less relevant. An actor or actress's involvement in a film or television show is not a part of their path to fame that can be recreated or sold in the same way as a product. Despite the evidence supporting the unclear influence of celebrities on box office numbers, the persisting belief in their influence means that films with big names attached can fetch larger numbers during foreign pre-sales, inadvertently perpetuating the belief in celebrity box office influence.

The latter part of the 20th century brought with it a rise in the popularity of the television in American homes, making the market for TV shows a profitable one. By May of 1994 "99% of U.S. households [had] at least one television set" ("TV Milestones"). As stigmas began to subside surrounding a film actor's choice to switch to television work, Barbara Stanwyck, who at this time was reaching her later years of life, decided to enter the world of television. For her, in part, this switch was an act of living the advice that she provided others. In one interview she decreed that it is good to know when "you've had your hour, your place in the sun", but also that it is "silly" that "to be old is death" in Hollywood (Flint). While she also switched to film in part simply hoping to continue doing the thing she loved, she discovered renewed success, winning her first ever major awards: three Emmys. Many of her co-stars from her time in television "credit her care and guidance as being responsible for their entire careers" (AFI). Her legacy of someone who was "beloved by all directors, actors, crews and extras" pushed her name even further towards a thing of legend in the later part of her career (Flint). Despite her secondary role in *The Colbys* (1985), the marketing of the show prominently included her. One reviewer remarked that Stanwyck stole the spotlight of the series, unsurprisingly considering she

"improved everything she was in" (IMDB). Despite the positive reviews of Stanwyck's acting in the show, overall the reviews were far from shining, and the show was ultimately canceled after just two short seasons. The project she worked on just two years earlier, *The Thorn Birds*, debuted to a wildly different reception. In 1983 the show won a stunning six Emmys. The next year, at the Golden Globes, the cast and crew walked away with another four awards in hand. For Stanwyck, the industry's ongoing faith in the impact of celebrities was a good thing, allowing her opportunities to continue with her passion long after many others saw their time in the business as passed. For aspiring talent, Hollywood's obsession with acquiring celebrity names for its projects means that breaking into the industry is extremely difficult. Should studies be able to more definitively determine a modern star's impact on their project's box office success, then more emerging actors and actresses may begin to snag roles in high-budget productions. For now, stars continue to secure roles with the unspoken promise of their followers as guaranteed viewers. Stanwyck's level of involvement in *The Colbys* and *The Thorn Birds* is roughly equivalent. Despite this, the shows found vastly different amounts of success. A television show's success relies on sustaining high viewership numbers across all its episodes in order to retain the funding from advertisers. Stanwyck and other star's names attached to these projects may have been enough to entice audiences into watching the first few episodes, but quality is what ultimately decided the fate of these two shows.

Over the last century, as technologies have improved, and visual media has grown to become a part of everyday life for Americans, the impact of celebrities on the likelihood of success of a film or television show has weakened. The numbers they produce at the box office are far from consistently high enough to be fetching tens of millions for an appearance. Despite this, beliefs persist in their impact, inadvertently making it appear as though the star's name is

the reason for success when the increased promotional budget that often accompanies their involvement could be equally responsible. While a celebrity's influence on a production's success has weakened, their influence over the public manifests itself in other ways, resulting in funding for research, and boosts in sales for endorsed products. Social media and the digital age have democratized fame. Their glamorous lives have begun to feel more achievable, and thus, the once god-like status of stars such as Barbara Stanwyck has become something of legend.

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