

Bob Dylan, the Ordinary Star

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This paper provides a study of Bob Dylan's public image as a star performer and what he represented for his audiences within the framework of 1960s counterculture. I will begin with an interpretation of his public image at the rise of his career in an effort to better understand how Dylan came to be considered a social symbol and a representative of a historically specific counterculture as the voice of a young frustrated generation. This study will focus primarily on D. A. Pennebaker's documentary *Don't Look Back*, which portrays a 23-year old Dylan on his 1965 English tour. Ultimately, we will see how this film brilliantly captures the paradox of Dylan's star popularity in light of his refusal to portray the star his audience wanted and expected. This was not only a personal struggle but a cultural contradiction.

In addition to featuring a counterculture celebrity, Pennebaker's film itself falls into the genre of counterculture films. Such films are indeed quite different from what had been done before. Not only did American cultural symbols shift in the 1960s (Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan, for example, became as famous as Marilyn Monroe had been in the '50s, becoming not only stars, but social icons) but the aspirations and principles of countercultural films moved to the opposite end of Hollywood's artifices. In effect, counterculture films are based on the idea of realism and experimentation: a formal freedom inspired by the French *Nouvelle Vague*.¹

Filmmakers of this period grew fascinated with popular musicians and often pursued them as subjects for their films. The portrayal of Bob Dylan

¹ The French *Nouvelle Vague* (New Wave) is a blanket term for a group of French filmmakers of the late '50s and '60s (François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Eric Rohmer, and so forth) who rejected classical visual and narrative forms. Most of them engaged in their work with the social and political upheavals of their time.

was one of the most successful of the '60s concert films, despite the fact that after this period of his career, Dylan steered clear of media coverage.

One of the most interesting features of *Don't Look Back* is the way in which Dylan is more often shown offstage—in the wings of the stage or in his hotel room—than in front of his audiences. Moreover, many sequences unfold in which he is confronted with the obscurities and contradictions of his public image. We often see him speaking with audience members and journalists, for example. These public confrontations clearly intrigued Pennebaker, who chose to place them in the forefront of his film. This point of view reveals a paradox, as such confrontations lead the viewer to question how Dylan's public image is to be defined. This analysis will show that Dylan's rejection of media categorization and his refusal to participate in the logic of popular demand represents a blatant rejection of the star system itself. As he portrays himself in *Don't Look Back*, Dylan has made himself truly indefinable.

Nonetheless, Bob Dylan was (and is) a star. Despite his resistance, he has become a popular icon and his objective identity cannot be detached from such a system. In his refusal to portray the star in the film, he was attempting to simply be the individual he was—a young, somewhat naïve and vulnerable artist on the rise to success. This “ordinary star” persona comes through forcefully in *Don't Look Back*.

Bob Dylan's career represents an intermediating symbol between the concept of public image (as defined by the star system), and the concept of art itself (with a message and an identity). It is clear that many of Dylan's song lyrics challenge oppressive systems. In a similar manner, Dylan also opposes the stifling of human dignity by challenging the flow of the star system; he refuses to allow his personal (and artistic) identity to be reduced to a matter of definition as determined for, and by, public opinion.

In order to further advance this study, I will now take a closer look at the historical evolution of the star system. The concept of “star,” as put forth in this paper, relates to an ideological point of view of an individual's public image as it satisfies expectations created within a given socio-cultural context. Richard Dyer provides an example of this phenomenon in his study of the Hollywood star system, entitled *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. In this book, Dyer treats Marilyn Monroe as an incarnation of a contemporary popular aspiration of freedom from the moral pressures of the '50s to live a fulfilling sexual life. Monroe's notoriety increased with respect to public expectations and can be regarded as symbolic of the sexual identity upheaval of the time. Sex outside of marriage and without the strong dictates of religion in everyday life was considered a sin. Mainstream American values of the 1950s obligated individuals to choose between a strict moral

code and their sexual urges. Marilyn Monroe's image provides a sort of solution: a "public" fantasy, free of culpability, a compromise between social and personal sexual identity.

Dylan's fame was a direct result of the star system of the '50s inasmuch as it was an integral part of the advent of the "rock 'n roll star system." Understanding expectations and aspirations of American society of the '50s—and especially the contradictions within the mainstream societal value system—will help us understand how Dylan was publicly perceived at the beginning of his career. In this way, we will be able to better understand in what ways Bob Dylan's role as star suggests a paradox.

Elvis Presley provides a good example for understanding the concept of the star as it developed in the '50s. Elvis represented a social phenomenon that gave way to a new expression of selfhood, as did the art of Dylan. In fact, the first waves of mainstream opposition to imposed moral codes of sexual behavior, authority, and personal identity made popular by the music and performances of Elvis opened up new attitudes about the body. The combination of two cultural media—music and image—and its massive distribution (in television, cinema, photography, album covers, and so on) had a major impact on popular attitudes concerning sex and the body. This is, of course, part and parcel with rock n' roll. Elvis' career is symbolic of the new performing phenomenon in which this combination of music and image becomes the norm: rock n' roll indeed became a "visual music" through the filmed and widely televised performances of Elvis. In this way, rock n' roll was one of the factors that effectively turned the moral code of 1950s America upside down, threatening the status quo and the accepted moral values of the time. Television critic John Crosby (Gillett 1970:35) voiced a typical conservative point of view of the era when he asked: "Where do we go with Elvis Presley? Certainly to obscenity, which is prohibited by the law."

Despite such opposition, the public intuitively identified with the image of Elvis because he was seen by many to embody a "magical resolution" of the racial problems of White America. As has been exhaustively detailed in numerous other texts, Presley brought black music to mainstream society in an acceptable (white) package.

Richard Dyer proposes a view of the star phenomenon with respect to audience reception, which can be applied to Elvis as well as to Bob Dylan:

Stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people. Though there is a sense in which stars must touch on things that

are deep and constant features of human existence, such features never exist outside a culturally and historically specific context.²

Within the counterculture of the 1960s, the youth of America divided into several different movements in the wake of the critique of traditional moral and social codes. The new phenomenon of boredom and the growing refusal to accept it led the younger generation to create new models of behavior and interpersonal relationships that were expressed corporally. In the '50s, many people in the Western world suffered from a sexual frustration that often led to social dysfunction. Richard Dyer provides further insight into this phenomenon (2004:22):

Sex was seen as perhaps the most important thing in life in 1950s America. Certain publishing events suggest this: the two Kinsey reports (on men, 1948: on women, 1953), the first issues of *Confidential* in 1951 and *Playboy* in 1953, both to gain very rapidly in circulation; best-selling novels such as *From Here To Eternity* 1951, *A House Is Not A Home* 1953, *Not As A Stranger* 1955, etc [...] Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* quotes a survey by Albert Ellis, published as *The Folklore of Sex* in 1961, which shows that “[i]n American media there were more than 2 times as many references to sex in 1960 as in 1950” (Friedan 1963:229), and she considers that “[f]rom 1950 to 1960 the interest of men in the details of intercourse paled before the avidity of women—both as depicted in these media, and as its audience” (*ibid*:230). Nor is this just a question of quantity; rather it seems like a high point on the trend that Michel Foucault has discussed in *The History of Sexuality* as emerging in the seventeenth century, whereby sexuality is designated as the aspect of human existence where we may learn the truth about ourselves.

Elvis is a product of this cultural context, in the same way as Marilyn Monroe had been. His public image makes him a sexual icon, and Presley himself played an important role in this process of liberation. Indeed, people identify with a sexual ideal: Elvis was the man whom men would dream of being, and the man women would dream of having. Elvis' notoriety is indeed based in part on his erotic appeal, focusing attention on both his body and his image. Rock 'n roll is profoundly related to the releasing of sexual mores, the letting go of corporal restraints. This is largely due to the fact that this genre of music is highly rhythmic and composed, to a great extent, for dancing. The cultural impact of rock n' roll has been enormous inasmuch as it serves as a form of cultural communication.

² From Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (2004:17).

It is quite clear that the 1950s youth generation embarked on a cultural revolution, inspired by rock n' roll as it challenged deep-set moral codes and sexual taboos. In the '60s, Dylan found himself in the midst of a number of ideological and political battles. Ironically, folk music became popular by way of the media's rules of communication largely resulting from the rock 'n roll movement. Such rules were based on the "star system," a visually symbolic system where communication was founded on the public image of the performer. This foundation of cultural signs is where the contradiction starts. Dylan was presented and perceived as a *rock* star by the media and by his fans. From a cultural and revolutionary point of view, Elvis Presley plays Dr. Jekyll (that which is "shown"), and Bob Dylan portrays Mr. Hyde (that which boils with anger inside and which reveals the "true identity" of the younger generation). This metaphor leads us to Foucault (2004) who considers, with regard to sexuality, that searching below the surface for what is concealed brings us closer to the "truth" than contemplating what is openly disclosed. Foucault deals with sexuality as a powerful expression of identity.

In this way, the duality between Bob Dylan and Elvis Presley suggests a metaphor of Foucault's theory in that it symbolizes the sexual identity of mainstream American youth. Foucault (2004:29) adds that what is below moulds the surface. Identifying Bob Dylan as a rock star necessitates a sexual dimension that becomes part and parcel of his "authenticity." It is, indeed, his authenticity which seduces his young listeners, and, perhaps more importantly, at a time when it was becoming more and more acceptable to rebel against sexual frustration. The star paradox that Dylan embodies is manifested in the parallel between the expression of sexual frustration, which is a personal matter providing drive and impulse, and that of social frustration, which inevitably seeks an outlet.

The evolution of Dylan himself as a child of the 1950s is quite telling. His idols were stars and their images inspired rebellion. For example, Dylan presented himself as a fan of James Dean who embodied teenage angst. He was also a fan of Elvis, who was devoted to the transmission of African American musical culture in a society suffering from segregation.

In the end, Dylan has moved away from the type of image Elvis projected. Indeed, Elvis became a "commercial star," a fabrication of Hollywood in contradiction to the ideological symbolism of his emergence. Dylan ultimately turned to other, lesser-known American musical roots to help find his voice. From this point of view, folk music became a tool of expression for Bob Dylan, and the budding star remained devoted to the

blues of great masters such as Leadbelly, Odetta, and the countless other blues and roots music stars of the era.

Before reaching the status of representative of a social culture, Dylan himself was influenced by the images of other celebrities. The most concrete example is his admiration for Woody Guthrie. His identification with this folk legend was at least partly mimetic. In a biography written by Sylvain Vanot (2001:8), we can see one description of this admiration:

After the fulgurating discovery of the disc of Guthrie, Dylan reads his autobiography: *Bound for Glory*. It is a revelation. He first passionately reads this book and then he did too with the books written by his new idol: he learns two hundred of his songs. He takes his voice inflections, carries the same cap as him. He learns playing the harmonica. [...] The young Dylan admires the effective simplicity of his poetry, but he also admires his marginal life style and his unrestrained “donjuanism.”

This process of identification is based on the desire for freedom acquired through sexual fulfilment. Merging the notions of sex and freedom, Dylan was to become the example for the new generation just as Guthrie had been for him.

The filmic collaboration between Bob Dylan and D. A. Pennebaker does not seem to be a mere stroke of good fortune. Indeed, the two men were travelling similar roads. Pennebaker is one of the pioneers of *cinéma vérité*, the film genre that revolutionized the documentary by setting aside film narration and doing away with the direction of actors and subjects in order to give way to spontaneous and uninterrupted observation. D. A. Pennebaker is one of the first directors associated with this tradition of filmmaking. In 1959, with his associate Richard Leacock, Pennebaker joined Drew Associates, a group of screenwriters created by Robert Drew (an advocate of the use of film techniques in journalism). Drew Associates developed the first hand-held 16mm camera with synchronized sound. It is precisely at the beginning of the 1960s, with the advent of these important technical innovations, that Pennebaker and the other members of Drew Associates contributed to the founding of the *vérité* tradition.

The search for authenticity in structure and content in the '60s can be found in artistic innovations in music, film, literature, and the fine arts. Pennebaker's work proposes a “pure,” untouched, unscripted representation of the star, which parallels Dylan's portrait as a musician who rejects the media artifices by reaching into folk traditions for inspiration. But the collaboration, albeit an unconscious one, does not stop there. This search for formal authenticity corresponds to the goal of preserving a marginal step to escape the traps and limitations of classification. Marginality also comes into

play in Dylan's clear refusal to imprison himself in a commercial classification system. From this point of view, artists such as Pennebaker and Dylan insist on the importance of evolving in their artistic expression as an integral part of personal fulfilment.

The process of "purification," which is tied up in this search for authenticity and which is reflected in the folk ideals of the time, provides a recurring theme in the structure of *Don't Look Back*. Pennebaker's project is one of demystification, without denial of the magical moment of performance. The filmmaker reveals the technical concerns and difficulties, events, decisions, and preparations that go into the making of a performance. By shooting scenes around songs being sung in hotel rooms, for example, he reveals for his viewers the various ways in which the performer and his art evolve apart from the stage, the radio, and formal performance. In fact, he discloses the intimate space inhabited by Dylan, and in the process, the performer can be seen as a typical, ordinary young man. The evaporation of the frontier between Dylan and the public leaves little space for artificial constructions of the star. This way of operating is based on an ideal of truth and freedom from artifice which Dylan and Pennebaker both share as artists.

Dylan and Pennebaker offer a model of formal liberation in *Don't Look Back*. Form is only the visible part of the iceberg because it clarifies the base of this cultural revolution as being a major desire for release from constraints, not only physical, but also intellectual, artistic, and political. In this way, Pennebaker and Dylan both represent the continuity and the destruction of the "Elvis phenomenon."

It is possible to say with certainty that music in this era (as well as film) played an integral part in the movement of liberation from constraints not only in content, but also in form. However, the concept of the star did not evolve similarly. Actually, the concept of the star might not have evolved at all concerning the passage from the '50s to the '60s. Notoriety creates myths, today as much as in 1965. Thus the reception of *Don't Look Back* illustrates that the intentions of Dylan have been wrongly interpreted. Dylan is perceived as a star just as Elvis was, surrounded by female fans and involved in all of the inter-workings of the media game. *Don't Look Back* exemplifies the changing processes of reception that were very much in parallel with the changing notion of stardom at the time. This film shows Dylan's reactions to this shift. The famous arrival scene at the London airport, in which Dylan is greeted by a crowd of fans and journalists, is a good example of Dylan's incomprehension of journalistic objectives.

Another well-known scene in *Don't Look Back* that illustrates this shift takes place in a bar where Dylan is giving an interview to a British

journalist. In this scene, the journalist constructs Dylan as a star but Dylan outright refuses to play the role and creates a sense of disquiet in pointing out the absurdity of the questions asked of him; he brazenly inverts the roles of interviewer and interviewee by challenging the pragmatic meaning of his interviewer's questions. This shift of focus creates an empty dialogue that demonstrates the paradoxical status of the star. We also find in this scene a direct parallel between the incomprehension between former and current generations—a genuine confrontation between authority and authorized unfolds. The journalist questions Dylan about his purposes but Dylan claims that he has no agenda and that he has no message to deliver, thereby rejecting the rebel image that the media attempts to impose upon him. He openly denounces the press by saying that the media have much to lose by publishing “the truth.” He informs his interviewer that he is highly sceptical of the ins and outs of media objectives. Forty years later, in *Chronicles, Volume 1*, Dylan would assert his lack of commitment to any “causes” as he had done in songs such as “Maggie’s Farm” and “Ballad of a Thin Man.”

Dylan’s remarks in this scene are very pertinent to an understanding of the evolution of the star system. The media creates stars according to guidelines designed to appeal to a specific audience. Contrary to Dylan, James Dean got something out of the image of rebel that the star system built for him. Dylan does not agree with such journalistic strategies of classification and refuses to be stereotyped. Pennebaker zooms in on the expression on his face—the journalist is uncomfortable. This view can be interpreted as a bias on Pennebaker’s part but, in the end, what stands out is that the journalist clearly does not have control of “his” interview. This occurs because the “star” simply refuses to play his assigned role.

Another interesting parallel between the reactions of Dylan to his stardom and those of his audience is featured in other aspects of Pennebaker’s film. Just as Dylan reacts passionately to controversial events of individual lives and universal concern through his songs, the public reacts passionately to his songs. In this way, public reaction is not without cues from the star system including its basic forms of idolatry. Dylan, however, is genuinely surprised by the reaction of the public, and in return, the public—including the media (and including Pennebaker)—is surprised by this “negative feedback” from their star. There is thus an echo, a kind of misunderstanding between the reactions of Dylan and the reactions of the public. It should be noted that Dylan represents much of the social unease of his generation without ever claiming to do so. Herein, we ultimately find the paradox of the “ordinary star”: the star phenomenon is necessary to popular reception and expression but at the same time also poses a threat to artistic authenticity. Dylan’s career provides an example of a very famous artist who

has fought to keep his autonomy. This paradox of “the ordinary star” can also be defined in this way: notoriety requires one to adapt to standard models because it is a question of being in agreement with the media system and the general public which it influences.

Bob Dylan’s rebellious personality can be compared to the attitude of an adolescent. Indeed, this shift intensifies the distance between the new and former generations in the countercultural context. There are two specific phenomena, one for each generation: the idolatry of the 1950s based on artifices—let’s call it the “Elvis syndrome”—combined with “popular marginality,” or the search for individual truth as it originated in 1960s counterculture. Fusion is clearly impossible. The scene of the inverted interview in *Don’t Look Back* is a telling instance of this.

Star-struck young women, with their wide eyes and flustered gestures, are an essential sign of popularity—indeed one of the pillars of the star system. Dylan’s rebellious way of thinking and behaving, along with his voice, his lyrics, and his hip appearance, clearly made him sexually appealing to young women of the time. In *Don’t Look Back*, Pennebaker shows him signing autographs for female fans who had been waiting hours in front of his hotel. Counterculture refuses the principle of appearance as distorting the truth and counterculture art is founded on a refusal of taboos. Therefore, imagery derives new forms of communication and *cinéma vérité* becomes representative of this part of history: the films of Pennebaker (and Leacock), among others, have an informative value, combining minimalist aesthetics with, for example, the sensation of JFK’s encounter with the American public in the film *Primary*. This art form also lends a direct apprehension of the stage upheaval of Jimi Hendrix’s ritual-like burning of his guitar in the film *Monterey Pop*. Such excess is highly symbolic. In the same way, the visual aspect of Dylan’s career is of utmost importance to an understanding of his reception.

Dylan thus serves as an intermediary between the former generation and the new one, with all the upheavals that such a role implies. He symbolically plays out the adolescent as the transition from childhood (dependence) to adulthood (independence). He is halfway between “mediatization” (over-exposure) and intimacy. This opens the way to independent productions, moving from Elvis to Dylan in terms of production and—from a cinematographic point of view—moving from Marilyn (Hollywood artifice) to Pennebaker (*cinéma vérité*). Much more than a simple passage, these transitions mark radical ruptures. Dylan plays the role of intermediary between these phenomena. He is neither completely star (according to the criteria of the 1950s), nor a simple bystander of his times.

Yet, he is both. He is as we see him in *Don't Look Back*, with his non-stop attempts to override the media game that consists of regarding successful artists as sacred objects, in order that he may express himself authentically. In sum, Dylan is simultaneously both actor and spectator, interviewed and interviewer, surprising and surprised.

Dylan thus becomes a symbol of the complex transition of the statutes of social icon between the 1950s and 1960s. Today he is considered as an icon for a revolutionary era because he represents the rough and risky passages from one cultural epoch to another. For these reasons it is unsatisfactory to regard him as a “mere” star.

To conclude, Bob Dylan's public image represents both the continuity of—and a break with—Elvis Presley, in terms of symbolic forms. He embraced the values of the path paved by Elvis in the process of counter-cultural liberation from social and moralistic constraints. In comparing these two stars to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, we are, of course, confronted with an individual archetype, and ultimately with a society full of contradictions.

This metaphor (as well as Pennebaker's film) shows the awakening of the younger generation of the 1960s. It is a question of breaking with the rules of conventional behaviour established up to that point, and most specifically with behavior established by the rules of “morality” and organized religion. Dylan refuses to yield to the standardization of the star system and insists on being master of his changes. He confronts himself with the concept of the star system, defined as a phenomenon dedicated to regulate the contradictory aspirations of the population. Dylan seems to have aimed at excluding himself from all classifications of “folk singer” when, in 1970, he produced his country album *Self Portrait*. In his attempt to do away with an undesired image and cultivate a voice true to his own artistic impulse, the singer strives for a new form of intimacy with his public. He likewise affirms his freedom. He rejects the image of star whose life must be public property with the intention of practicing his art on his own terms.

Dylan is therefore the symbol of the political rupture between the generations, as a young person who refuses to yield any longer to the rules of behavior and a value system dictated by the former generation. But, once again, Dylan is most obviously a star of the 1960s. This fact is the crux of the paradox. Thus Dylan provides us with the antithesis of a star by refusing categorization, yet reaching the status of a *popular star* inasmuch as he is representative of the desire of the very audience for whom he performs not to be categorized. Bob Dylan is involuntarily marginal and unifying at the same time.

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