

***Meet The Burtons*¹ - The Celebrity Legacy of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton**

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The purpose of this paper is to examine the role which Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton played in initiating the nature of contemporary celebrity culture. Using the couple's scandalous affair which took place during the filming of *Cleopatra* (1963) as a case study, the paper will explore how the collapse of the studio system, combined with the rise of the paparazzi and the development of the telephoto lens, led to the public's insatiable appetite for images and details of celebrities' private lives. As everything Taylor and Burton did made headlines around the world, it will be argued that the Burtons helped set the scene for today's super celebrity couples like the Beckhams, Tom and Katie and Brad and Angelina. Opposing cultural decline views that celebrities are trivial and serve only commercial purposes, the paper proposes that celebrities are important cultural constructions, which, like time capsules, are capable of preserving vital information about the societies who consume and construct them. Thus, the analysis of Taylor and Burton's public affair will be shown to contain important insights into the changing attitudes towards sex and marriage during the 1960s.

Although Hollywood's infamous studio system had successfully managed to dictate the production of films and celebrities for the first half of the twentieth century, the second half, with its revolutionary technological, industrial and cultural changes, witnessed its demise. The first distinct change came in 1948, when the U.S. Supreme Court broke the major studios' monopoly on the film industry (which had consisted of production, distribution and exhibition), by ordering them to sell their movie theatres and relinquish their exhibition role. The rising popularity of television in the early 1950s also posed a great threat. Not only had studios become worried over the decline in cinema attendance as audiences grew content to be entertained at home, but also at the increased surplus of 'personalities' which the new medium was helping to produce, as it provided "more space for more faces" (Gamson, 1994: 43).

As a result of the changing nature of the times, studios were forced to begin contracting stars on a "picture-by-picture basis", rather than "owning" them for a fixed period of time as they had in the past (Gamson, 2001: 270). In 1950 for example, Hollywood star James Stewart set the scene for actors to assert their independence in the new 'freelance system', by negotiating his own contract which included a flat studio rate and a share of the profits (Cashmore, 2006: 65). Gamson, in his historical analysis of twentieth century celebrity, describes how independent publicists, from the recently developed PR profession, soon became "powerful players" in this new environment, as they worked together with stars to help them become "proprietors of their own image" (1994: 41). Such freedoms however, which allowed stars to have greater control over the films they chose to appear in, the studios they worked with, and the publicity that was distributed about them (Ndalianis & Henry, 2002: ix), would also have long-lasting consequences. In abandoning the studio system, and thus the protective publicity that it provided, stars were essentially left wide open to the scandal hungry media and public which was to emerge during the cultural revolution of the 1960s.

¹ Title taken from the 1970 *Here's Lucy* episode in which Taylor and Burton guest starred.

For these reasons, the events surrounding the epic film *Cleopatra* (1963) can in many ways be seen as illustrative of a number of the ramifications which ensued as a result of the breakdown of the studio system. Although 20th Century-Fox had originally conceived of *Cleopatra* as a low-cost film to help earn the ailing studio some quick cash, the legendary motion picture would take over three years to complete and eventually become one of the most expensive films ever made, with a final production cost of \$US44 million – a total equivalent to more than \$US400 million in today's currency. With constant cast and crew changes, relocations, escalating budgets and leading lady Elizabeth Taylor's demand for \$1 million following her release from MGM (an unprecedented sum for an actress at the time), the film was a regular source of public interest throughout its entire production.

However, it would be the scandalous romance between Elizabeth Taylor and her Marc Antony co-star, Welsh actor Richard Burton, which would succeed in attracting the majority of attention. Not only did the affair, or *Le Scandale*, as Burton famously dubbed it, create a worldwide media scandal by playing a notable role in initiating the changes of the sexual revolution, but also, in the process, arguably paved the way for our current culture's incessant interest in the private lives of celebrities. Although both parties were married, the pair had become romantically involved in a complex and passionate affair shortly after beginning their scenes as Cleopatra and Marc Antony. While it was impossible for anyone to predict it at the time, the two stars, together, with the "enthusiastic assistance of a newly rapacious media", would ultimately figure in one of the most "dramatic changes in popular culture of the twentieth century" (Cashmore, 2006: 18).

With so much riding on *Cleopatra*, 20th Century-Fox was paranoid that news of the affair between the married Taylor and married Burton would outrage conservative society of the early 1960s, and ultimately incite a boycott against the film. Taylor had only recently recovered from being labelled a homewrecker for having broken up the marriage of Eddie Fisher and Debbie Reynolds. It was not until a sensational near-death experience with pneumonia that Taylor was able to redeem herself in both the public and film industry's eyes, picking up a Best Actress Oscar for her last MGM film, *Butterfield 8* (1960). Fox executives feared, however, that the public might not be so forgiving if Taylor proved responsible for the break-up of a second marriage, and therefore ordered publicists to promptly 'bottle up' details and deny the affair (Brodsky & Weiss, 1963: 15).

Despite the studio's best efforts to conceal their relationship, it was Marcello Geppetti's famous paparazzi shots of a scantily clad Taylor and Burton kissing and sunbaking on the back of a yacht in the Mediterranean which not only helped confirm rumours and turn the affair into a worldwide news event, but also transform the nature of celebrity culture itself. Although we may be accustomed to seeing paparazzi-styled photos of celebrities' most private and embarrassing moments today, in June of 1962, the world had never seen anything like it. The candid images of the adulterous lovers were a far cry from early Hollywood's carefully constructed studio portraits, which typically portrayed stars as pristine gods and goddesses. While there had always been rumours surrounding stars in gossip magazines such as *Confidential* and *Hush Hush*, never before had there been pictures such as these to substantiate them (*Snap! A History of the Paparazzi*, 2005).

Like many of the key changes in the history of our relationship with celebrities, the groundbreaking photos were primarily the result of a new development in media technology – in this case the telephoto lens. With the studio's help, stars in the past had often been able to choose which aspects of their personal lives they wanted to become public, and which

aspects they wished to remain private. As the press relied heavily on the studios' 'generosity' to provide them with a steady supply of star images, photographers of the 'Golden Age' "generally stuck to the rules" (Sennett, 1998: 92). Female stars, for instance, were strictly forbidden by studios to be photographed holding drinks or smoking cigarettes in public (ibid). Now however, with the advent of the telephoto lens which allowed freelance photographers to go behind the scenes and access, at great physical distance, the activities of stars in their own time, all facets of celebrities' lives, no matter how personal or jeopardising, were made open to the public. Although the Taylor-Burton photos were not of course the sole factor responsible for changing the mutual relationship between celebrities and the media, there was, as Cashmore argues, a strong sense in which it "signalled the change" (2006: 21). The shots signified that an open season had been declared, and that stars were now considered "fair game" (ibid).

The paparazzi had first emerged in the late 1950s, when Hollywood came to Rome to make use of the city's cheap filming facilities. With stars convinced they were free from the constraints of home, it was easy for eager Italian photographers to snap compromising shots of the Hollywood stars out on the town. The first such instance occurred in August 1958, when Swedish actress Anita Ekberg, and her English husband, actor Anthony Steel, were confronted by freelance photographer Tazio Secchiaroli stepping out of their car into a well-known Roman nightclub. As cameras flashed in the unsuspecting couple's face, a scuffle ensued, and an angry Steel was snapped fending off the photographer. The image of the provoked star proved so popular, that Secchiaroli earned a hundred times his regular fee (*Snap! A History of the Paparazzi*, 2005).

This new breed of zealous photographers would largely enter our popular culture thanks to Federico Fellini's classic film, *La Dolce Vita* (1960). Starring Miss Ekberg after her own real-life encounter, the film focussed on the extravagant lifestyles of Rome's rich and famous, and the extraordinary lengths to which the new breed of photographers would go in order to snap them. According to Fellini, he christened the most persistent photographer in the film 'Paparazzo', after an annoying schoolboy friend, as he thought the name connoted a buzzing insect, which constantly hovered, darted and stung (ibid). As a result, the name stuck, and quickly became part of our "popular vocabulary" (Cashmore, 2006: 19).

Just as 20th Century-Fox had predicted, the confirmation of the Taylor and Burton affair, thanks to the publication of the revealing paparazzi shots, generated an unprecedented amount of moral outrage around the globe. While the Italian newspaper, *Il Tempo*, called Taylor a "vamp who destroys families and sucks on husbands like a praying mantis" (in Bragg, 1988: 163), back in America, Southern Congresswoman, Iris Blitch, proposed that Taylor and Burton be denied re-entry into the United States on the grounds of "undesirability" (in Cottrell & Cashin, 1971: 252). The most damning condemnation of the affair however, came directly from the Vatican itself. Not only did it accuse Taylor of "erotic vagrancy", but also publicly questioned her right as a mother to her three children as well as the little girl she was currently in the process of adopting (in Bragg, 1988: 163).

Such examples of bad press and social condemnation can in many ways be seen as symptomatic of the demise of the old studio days, when studio bosses went to great lengths to shield their stars from the slightest hint of negative publicity. Following the 1921 Fatty Arbuckle affair, in which the public (who had not yet acquired a taste for celebrity scandals) was shocked to hear of the rape and murder accusations surrounding the loveable comedian, everything from stars' personal biographies and hobbies, to their publicity shots and

appearances, was carefully chosen and constructed by studios in order to sustain a desired image. Indeed, so engineering were the 'almighty' studios, that deals were often made with the authorities to ensure that the stars' various indiscretions were never disclosed. Taylor was thus justifiably shocked at the inability of 20th Century-Fox to protect her public image in the manner MGM had done during her contracted years at that studio (Taraborrelli, 2006: 201-2). Now, as a result of being on her own under the new freelance system, she had even managed to "tick off the Pope!" (ibid).

Yet while Taylor and Burton's sexual indiscretion may have upset conservative members of the Establishment, for many, the affair was seen as a sign of emancipation from the stuffy moral constraints of the past. As Burton's biographer Melvyn Bragg puts it, the timing of *Le Scandale* was "potent and perfect", as it "hit the morality of the time like a needle" (1988: 164). With the 'Summer of Love' fast approaching, the society of the 1960s was about to undergo a change in sexual standards and attitudes, and the *Cleopatra* stars "were nothing if not a reflection of those changes" (Taraborrelli, 2006: 200). While individuals had, of course, taken part in socially frowned upon activities long before the arrival of Taylor and Burton, the majority often chose to remain hidden in the shadows, for fear of discrimination and loss of respect (Wike, in Taraborrelli, 2006: 200). Just as today's celebrity ambassadors use their star power to help bring awareness to prevailing social issues, Taylor and Burton lit a beacon of hope for the numerous others caught in the same plight. Sociology and anthropology professor Dr. Joyce Wike testifies to the importance of celebrity leaders in society, arguing that they ultimately help individuals reason: "if they can do it, why can't I?" (quoted in Taraborrelli, 2006: 200). Similarly, Turner, in his study of the cultural functions of celebrity, explains how gossip, whether at a local neighbourly level, or a global celebrity level, acts as an effective avenue for "sharing social judgements" and "processing social behaviour" (2004: 107). He notes that rather than being exemplary individuals, the subjects of celebrity gossip are often those who, like Taylor and Burton, step outside convention in some way, and allow audiences to explore and debate new social and cultural identity formations (ibid). While the 1950s had been a utopian-like era which stringently cultivated its conservative family values, the 1960s would prove to be a decade characterised by its search for freedom, truth and individuality. Through the public display of their personal relationship, Taylor and Burton, with a refreshing air of honesty, thus *appeared* to be proclaiming to the world: "We love each other, we know we are destroying marriages and disrupting families, but love is all you need and all that counts and we are not going to hide it. Furthermore, folks, we don't give a damn" (Bragg, 1988: 164).

In many ways, it was Marcello Geppetti's initial paparazzi shots of Taylor and Burton which were responsible for triggering much of the public's empathy and excitement. For the first time, stars were depicted as ordinary individuals who, contrary to the perceived Hollywood image, experienced complex human emotions and dilemmas just like everyone else. After glimpsing the stars "in the raw", audiences would never again be satisfied with the "lush, dreamy portraits" which had previously been the staples of the entertainment industry (Cashmore, 2006: 23). Cashmore thus considers Geppetti's shots of Taylor and Burton as one of the prime triggers of our contemporary celebrity culture, as it not only liberated photojournalists and the media by "releasing them in new directions", but also: "set off a chain reaction among the stars and, perhaps most importantly, the fans....[T]hey wouldn't watch, read about, and follow the exploits of the famous if they didn't get something from it. Their tastes were changing" (ibid: 22).

After the publication of Geppetti's pictures, paparazzi were constantly on the *Cleopatra* set. Due to popular demand, a photo of the two lovers was now worth a small fortune. Actor Martin Landau, who starred in the film, recalled how determined paparazzi literally hung off cliffs and scaffolding vying to get a shot with their long-lensed cameras (in Taraborrelli, 2006: 196). With the public eagerly awaiting the latest news of the affair, it was evident that the wheels were being set in motion for today's celebrity culture, where celebrities' private lives often attract more attention than their actual work or talent. Jack Brodsky, one of the publicists for *Cleopatra*, described how the public air over the affair was essentially one of "curiosity and amusement", rather than that of "indignation", with even the local grocer constantly asking him whether it was "true about Taylor and Burton" (Brodsky & Weiss, 1963: 85). The biggest testament of the public's enthusiasm however, came the day after the Vatican's bitter attack, when Taylor filmed Cleopatra's grand entrance into Rome atop a massive fifty-foot Sphinx pulled by three hundred Nubian slaves. Rather than heckling and jeering at her, the thousands of Italian-Catholic extras showered her with adulation by blowing kisses and shouting "*LEEZ, LEEZ, LEEZ*", as opposed to the scripted "Cleopatra, Cleopatra, Cleopatra". Thus, just like the real Cleopatra two thousand years before her, it seemed that Elizabeth Taylor also succeeded in conquering Rome.

As a result of the immense publicity which Taylor and Burton were generating, 20th Century-Fox soon abandoned its initial policy of denial, and quickly decided to cash in on the public interest. Although director Joseph L. Mankiewicz had originally planned to release the film as two three-hour epics, with the first focussing on Cleopatra's relationship with Julius Caesar, and the second with Marc Antony, the reluctant director was ordered to abandon his vision and edit the two into a single film, for fear that Taylor and Burton would no longer be an item by the time the second film premiered. Similarly, the film's trailer ended with a quick glimpse of one of Taylor and Burton's on-screen love scenes, which was strategically placed to titillate audiences and pique their interest. Although studios could no longer exclusively control the publicity stars received, they soon realised they could use this new form of publicity generated by the paparazzi and tabloids to their own advantage. As Bragg notes, Taylor and Burton had essentially "moved out of movies" and into "a self-contained media event which was unpurchaseable publicity" (1988: 163).

On June 12, 1963, more than ten thousand eager spectators filled Times Square to witness the spectacle of *Cleopatra*'s world premiere, while tickets to the film were sold out for four months prior to opening day. Audiences were convinced it seemed that they would finally see evidence of the world's most scandalous romance played out before them on the big screen. Despite the common misconception that the film was a flop, as it was impossible for it to initially recoup its exuberant production costs, *Cleopatra* proved to be one of the highest earning films of the sixties, and remained among the top five action-adventure movies of all time until the rise of the blockbusters in the 1980s (Finler, 1981: 284). Through cinema re-releases, television rights, video and DVD sales, the epic has since made 20th Century Fox a considerable profit.

A large part of the public's interest in the Taylor-Burton affair can be attributed to the parallels which existed between the two actors and the legendary lovers they were portraying. To many, it seemed that Cleopatra and Marc Antony had been literally reincarnated as Taylor and Burton. The dialogue of the film, which deliberately emphasised the connection, seemed just as reflective of the modern situation as of the ancient one. While Cleopatra, played by the already four times married Taylor, confessed the joy of finally knowing true love after so many years, a love-struck Antony, played by the equally besotted Burton, declared that

everything he should ever want to hold, look upon, have or be was there with him now, with her. Even Mankiewicz admitted that the two actors were not just playing Antony and Cleopatra. During the filming of one of their love scenes for instance, the director was forced to yell cut three times, before the amorous couple finally stopped, ultimately leaving the director feeling like an intruder (in Brodsky & Weiss, 1963: 59).

In many ways, the legacies of the celebrated figures of the ancient world were strongly influencing the image and perception of the stars in the modern world. For instance, frequent similarities were drawn between Burton and Antony, as the actor was criticised by many for throwing away his respected stage career in exchange for his romance with Taylor and the glamour of Hollywood, in much the same way that Antony was condemned for turning his back on Rome in favour of Cleopatra and the luxuries of Egypt. Taylor too was regularly compared to her historical counterpart, as both she and Cleopatra were well known for their reputations as tempting seductresses. Indeed, classical scholar Robert Garland asserts that it was quite appropriate that Taylor played the part of the Egyptian Queen, as Cleopatra, more than any other personality in the ancient world, came closest to achieving the legendary star status we associate with Taylor today (2006: 131). Even in the absence of today's paparazzi, he notes that the ancient queen was "still the object of endless gossip" (ibid). Her passionate, yet illicit, romance with Antony similarly scandalised Rome in much the same way as did the Taylor and Burton romance. Like modern celebrity gossip magazines, the ancient Roman historians and poets relished publicising scandalous details of Antony and Cleopatra's private and extravagant lives. For instance, according to Plutarch, the two lovers founded a circle of friends known as the "Inimitable Livers", who threw lavish banquets for each other on a daily basis (Plutarch, *Life of Marc Antony*, 28). Similarly, Pliny the Elder describes how on one such occasion, Cleopatra reportedly drank a pearl dissolved in vinegar, in order to prove she could host a more expensive banquet than Antony (in Flamarion, 1997: 116). As is the case with celebrity gossip magazines, it was also often hard to decipher whether or not such outlandish stories were true.

Although *Le Scandale* quite literally could have ended Taylor's and Burton's careers, the whole affair ultimately transformed them into two of the biggest celebrities the world has ever known. Between 1964 and 1972, the couple, or 'Liz and Dick' as they became affectionately known, would earn more than \$50 million – a fortune equivalent to more than half a billion in today's currency. Even the stars' marriage, which put an end to the illicit aspect of their relationship, did little to divert the public's interest in them. Following their arrival in Boston for instance, where Burton was to appear on stage in *Hamlet* (1964), the newlyweds were not only greeted by a 3,500 strong group of fans at the airport, but also had their hair pulled and their clothes ripped by the mob of enthusiastic fans waiting for them at their hotel. Likewise, when *Hamlet* was to premiere in New York, police were forced to cordon off whole blocks in order to protect the couple from the thousands of spectators lining the streets hoping to glimpse them.

While Hollywood had always known 'star couples', from Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, to Carole Lombard and Clark Gable, it is Taylor and Burton who can best be seen as having set the scene for today's super celebrity couples. Like the Beckhams, Tom and Katie or Brad and Angelina, everything the Burtons did, bought and said made headlines in newspapers and magazines around the world, and, to add to audiences' delight, the duo seemed to revel in the incessant attention lavished upon them. As they had during the scandalous early days of their relationship, the couple would continue to live much of their extravagant and turbulent married lives in public. An interviewer's delight, they would

regularly drink, tease, argue and verbally abuse each other in front of reporters, while still somehow never failing to profess their true and undying love. As Bragg concludes, whatever they did was accepted, as they were essentially helping to break a mould (1988: 164). New York Paparazzo Ron Galella, who regularly snapped The Burtons and later became famous for his candid shots of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, similarly testifies to the couple's unique and enduring celebrity power:

As a photographer, I found Burton and Taylor almost better as a team than they were individually. They were certainly the most important celebrity couple I have ever photographed. Let's face it, they were the couple of the century. They were the duo who counted. They were the pair that everybody in the U.S., if not the world, looked to and chased after. They were bigger than life. Their love story, as played out in the pages of every newspaper and magazine from Australia to Zanzibar, made them instantly and forever famous.

(quoted in Heymann, 1995: 454-5)

As with the filming of *Cleopatra*, a significant part of audiences' enduring interest in the Burtons was undoubtedly due to the similarities between their on-screen roles and their real lives. Whether playing the part of adulterous lovers in films like *The Sandpiper* (1965) and *The Comedians* (1967), or brawling couples in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966) and *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), the scenarios seemed to constantly reflect the varying aspects of their complex relationship. Despite critics often panning them, their films proved to be constant hits at the box office, as audiences flocked to the cinemas for the simple purpose of seeing Taylor and Burton play Taylor and Burton. Part of the success of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* for instance, a film which not only managed to earn \$US40 million at the box-office, but also win critics' approval and Taylor her second Oscar, was the general consensus that the bitter brawls between George and Martha offered secret insights into the battling Burtons' own tumultuous marriage. At a time when the entire Western world seemed to be "shaking itself loose of its matrimonial bonds", the Burtons, though their roles as the unharmoniously wed George and Martha, once again arguably defined the morality of the time (Bragg, 1988: 205). As Dyer pointed out in *Heavenly Bodies* (1986), the whole phenomenon of stardom revolves around audiences' constant desire to uncover what stars are 'really' like, and the Burtons' films consistently provided such answers. Even the stars' last ensemble, seven years after their second divorce, appeared to be reflective of their unconventional relationship. Playing the part of a divorced couple who fall in love again in the hugely successful stage production of Noel Coward's *Private Lives* (1983), audiences and tabloids speculated that Taylor and Burton would similarly rekindle their famous romance, until Burton's sudden death of a brain haemorrhage the following year finally laid such hopes to rest.

In the four decades since Taylor and Burton's heyday, scandals and 'uncontrolled' paparazzi shots have become a defining feature of our contemporary celebrity culture. Images exposing a boozy night on the town or an illicit relationship often do little to tarnish a star's reputation or upcoming film, as 'any' publicity is generally considered 'good' publicity. Indeed, misdemeanours that once brought "an abrupt halt to careers" can now be used as occasions for launching and rejuvenating them, as both Paris Hilton's sex tape scandal and Hugh Grant's prostitute encounter amply demonstrated (Cashmore, 2006: 148). For audiences, as Gamson (1994) concluded in his study of the function of celebrity gossip, it seems that the actual truth or validity of such incidents are often inconsequential, as it is the

process of exploring and discussing the range of personal issues which they raise, such as relationships and drug and alcohol abuse, that is deemed the most fulfilling. With their eleven movies, two marriages, two divorces and an extraordinary romance which took the world by storm, the legendary life and career of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton can, however, be quite clearly recognised as having started it all. The decline of the studio system, combined with the rise of the paparazzi, had given society a taste for the private, scandalous and extravagant lives of celebrities, and, as time would tell, there would be no turning back.

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Images:

Image 1 – Kelley, K., 1981, *Elizabeth Taylor: The Last Star*, (New York: Simon & Schuster).

Image 2 – http://www.reelclassics.com/Actors/Burton/images9/lizt_burton_lifecover_19apr63.jpg

Image 3 – Kelley, K., 1981, *Elizabeth Taylor: The Last Star*, (New York: Simon & Schuster).

Image 4 – Duncan, P., ed., 2008, *Movie Icons: Elizabeth Taylor*, (Köln: Taschen).

Image 5 – Nickens, C., 1984, *Elizabeth Taylor: A Biography in Photographs*, (London: Hutchinson).

Image 6 – Kelley, K (1981) *Elizabeth Taylor: The Last Star*, New York: Simon & Schuster.

Image 7 – Bragg, M (1988) *Rich: The Life of Richard Burton*, London: Hodder & Soughton.

Image 8 – Bragg, M (1988) *Rich: The Life of Richard Burton*, London: Hodder & Soughton.