

## Pawns in Their Game: Bob Dylan's Celebrity Persona in *Dont Look Back*

### « Rien qu'un pion dans leur jeu » : la construction de l'image de Bob Dylan dans *Dont Look Back*

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

Documentary film craft in the mid-twentieth century, like many other arts at the time, evolved aesthetically around the notions of “truthfulness” and “honesty” in the depiction of their subjects. Simultaneous with these artistic innovations was the ascendancy of a commercial popular culture industry that often appropriated aesthetic ideals of authenticity to construct celebrity narratives. This article examines the constructed celebrity persona of Bob Dylan in D.A. Pennebaker's American *cinéma vérité* production *Dont Look Back*. Utilizing a critical theory approach based on the philosophy and political economy of celebrity aura, it addresses questions of directorial subjectivity, celebrity self-consciousness and the contemporaneous subject/audience interface within a larger discussion of the intentionality of celebrity construction as part and parcel of films and other media dedicated to documenting the rise of pop superstars. While *Dont Look Back* attempts to reify Dylan as a rebellious voice speaking the social concerns of his audience, the film also testifies to the commodification of such stars by a 1960s corporate media machinery whose ultimate intentions were not necessarily so public-spirited.

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## ABSTRACT

Documentary film craft in the mid-twentieth century, like many other arts at the time, evolved aesthetically around the notions of “truthfulness” and “honesty” in the depiction of their subjects. Simultaneous with these artistic innovations was the ascendancy of a commercial popular culture industry that often appropriated aesthetic ideals of authenticity to construct celebrity narratives. This article examines the constructed celebrity persona of Bob Dylan in D.A. Pennebaker's American *cinéma vérité* production *Dont Look Back*. Utilizing a critical theory approach based on the philosophy and political economy of celebrity aura, it addresses questions of directorial subjectivity, celebrity self-consciousness and the contemporaneous subject/audience interface within a larger discussion of the intentionality of celebrity construction as part and parcel of films and other media dedicated to documenting the rise of pop superstars. While *Dont Look Back* attempts to reify Dylan as a rebellious voice speaking the social concerns of his audience, the film also testifies to the commodification of such stars by a 1960s corporate media machinery whose ultimate intentions were not necessarily so public-spirited.

In Donn Alan Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back* (1967), the notion of “getting it” and what such subjectivity means is the basis for the exploration of the film's central figure, Bob Dylan. To Dylan, he and “it” are one and the same, and it is important that his audience, his friends and Pennebaker get him. However, from the opening frame of the film, Dylan—incessantly preoccupied by the desire to be understood—will not make this comprehension a necessarily easy task. Behind his non-diegetic ventriloquism of “Subterranean Homesick Blues,” behind his

equivocal mask, there exists Dylan the musician, messenger and man (Fig. 1). Through the *cinéma vérité* device of signified actuality we are confronted with the historical narrative construction, thus the idealization, of Bob Dylan as *deus rebellis*. Here, mystification of the man (in favour of the myth) and intentionality of documentary style act in tandem not to represent, but to construct a popular culture persona for the audiences that celebrated Dylan's ascending celebrity in the 1960s. Pennebaker sought better ways to sensitively capture Dylan as a celebrity subject, breaking new ground in the open narrative documentary form as a technique for popular culture myth-making. This article examines the constructed celebrity persona of Dylan in *Dont Look Back* via a critical theory approach based on the philosophy and political economy of celebrity aura. As well, questions of directorial subjectivity, celebrity self-consciousness and the contemporaneous subject/audience interface are addressed within a larger discussion of the intentionality of celebrity construction as part and parcel of films dedicated to documenting, and often commodifying, pop culture superstars.



**Fig. 1.** Dylan advises we watch “it” in opening scene of *Dont Look Back* (1967).

In step with the flourishing American rock music business in the early 1960s, the art of filmmaking was undergoing dynamic changes in technology and style. Where there had once been an immense studio system of feature film production with its formalities of technical and narrative perfection, novel independent and intimate methods of the craft were explored by a new breed of filmmakers. Directors such as Mike Nichols, John Cassavetes and Stanley Kubrick altered traditional ways of composing and editing their non-traditional storylines. At the Actors Studio, Lee Strasberg argued that effective film performers were those who did not act but became their characters.

At the same time, documentary film technique was undergoing radical changes. For example, in 1961 the Canadian documentarians Wolf Koenig and Roman Kroitor co-directed the observational direct cinema film *Lonely Boy*—an award-winning study of the pop singer Paul Anka. As a precursor to rock music documentaries such as *Dont Look Back*, *Lonely Boy* used observational techniques to critique the rock music industry, and Anka's teen star image constructed by it, through what Grant (2003, p. 48) refers to as the "phenomenon of pop idol-dom." As well, the late-1950s Canadian documentary television series *Candid Eye*, with its movement away from interview techniques, drew its inspiration from the work of the humanist photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and his search for the decisive moment in time—a motif certainly not lost on Pennebaker. However, it was with an eye towards the French *cinéma vérité* movement and its seminal work, *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961), that a small group of Americans pushed the envelope of observational documentary production style. Unlike the French "cinema-truth" and its absolute reliance upon the provocative intrusion of the filmmaker, the evolving American documentary style eliminated directorial influence on the camera's subjects (Eaton 1979, p. 40). The movement became known as American Direct Cinema, and its founders were an eclectic mix of engineers, filmmakers and sound specialists occupying a suite of offices on 43rd Street in Manhattan, New York—home of Drew Associates.

A graduate of Yale with a degree in mechanical engineering, Pennebaker honed his documentary film skills in the late 1950s and early 1960s while working at Drew Associates alongside Robert Drew and Richard Leacock. Drew was the visionary and driving force as the executive producer generating funds and story ideas that could be best translated by the new American *cinéma vérité* style. Leacock was the pivotal figure behind the concept of releasing the documentary camera/sound unit from the strictures of static tripods and tethered sound sync cords—of making the camera completely mobile, spontaneous and unobtrusive. To this mix, Pennebaker provided the technical support and camera operation necessary to achieve the results that made Drew Associates pioneers in American *cinéma vérité*. For Leacock and Pennebaker (and other Drew Associates colleagues such as Hope Ryden and Albert Maysles), the most important goal was reducing the influence of film technology itself in recording events as they happened. Utilizing lightweight 16mm cameras and portable sync-sound recording devices, Drew Associates was successful in making the break from the formal sense-making techniques of traditional documentaries, viz. Robert Flaherty's *Louisiana Story* (1948) or even Karel Reisz's *We Are the Lambeth Boys* (1959), to an innovative and relatively open narrative structure and shooting style. As Plantinga (1997, p. 137) observes:

Excited by the possibilities of this new equipment, early users developed an ethos of observation and recording; the function of the filmmaker became to transparently observe the world. Although this style emerged first and foremost as a series of stylistic prohibitions (no voice-over narration, no influence on the profilmic event, no artificial lighting), it also extended to practices of structure and editing.

As a member of Drew Associates, Pennebaker formulated the theories of documentary production that guided his own efforts in the future. Indeed, those nascent years under the tutelage of Drew provided the means by which Pennebaker (and Leacock) came to understand the aesthetic psychology of capturing the subtleties of human actions in the journalistic *cinéma vérité* style. According to Pennebaker (quoted in O'Connell 1992, p. 61):

I think you have to understand that Ricky and I were both won over to Drew, not just because he was coming in at the right time, (but it) was something we needed. . . . Drew was aware of all the problems, and how we did it, and how you were able to get some sort of entre to a person and how crucial that entre was.

Still, by the end of 1963 Pennebaker and Drew were moving in different philosophical and creative directions. For his part, Pennebaker disliked the often-closed narrative and formal editing style used by Drew to assemble the open-style footage being shot in the field by the Associates cinematographers (O'Connell 1992, p. 222). In early 1964, Leacock and Pennebaker left Drew Associates and formed their own venture, Leacock-Pennebaker. As one of their first projects, in *Dont Look Back* they sought to build a new grammar for the documentary—this time in a language of art that was not in the service of journalism or sociology *per se*, as were the cases of Leacock's *Mother's Day* (1963) or later in the Maysles brothers' *Salesman* (1969). Rather, their creative impulses were turned towards integrating film craft and the pop culture media system—particularly popular music—that was gaining importance in the mid-1960s. *Dont Look Back* arrived at this intersection of Pennebaker's maturing *cinéma vérité* aesthetic and Dylan's ambitious desire for international fame. It was a juncture where the corporate music star system found the documentary film an efficient publicity device to aid in the creation of the otherwise enigmatic artist as a popular rock star. Bouquerel (2007, p. 156) refers to this effort as “the search for authenticity in structure and content in 1960s artistic innovations in music, film, literature, and the fine arts.”

What emerged from the *Dont Look Back* project was a new set of formalities altogether—formalities that cloaked what was, in fact, a narrowed cinematic structure in the guise of a new American *cinéma vérité* open style of production. Even Pennebaker himself has, in time, come to agree that pure open structure and the non-intrusive filmmaker as a means of representation is an impossible quest: the filmmaker must be subjective in production choices such as shooting and editing, with the final cut reflecting “the biases and limitations of his emotions and intellect.”<sup>1</sup> Still, these were certainly not the aesthetic

claims of the American *cinéma vérité* filmmakers (including Pennebaker) in the 1960s—in fact, they were quite the opposite. Insofar as *Dont Look Back* utilizes *cinéma vérité* techniques as a set of formal rhetorical devices to impart objectivity through notions of impartiality and balance, the film must be seen as inherently containing a most definite ideological position towards its subject, the charismatic Dylan (Fig. 2). It is a position best viewed through both the historical circumstances of the period in which the film was produced and the intentions of the filmmaker, its producer and even its star with regards to its ultimately commercial purpose for audiences in the 1960s.

Certainly, as a reconstitution of Dylan's 1965 British tour, *Dont Look Back* employs interpretative strategies intended to elicit very specific and preferred reactions in the viewer. Following Dyer's (1993, p. 2) observation that representations are presentations using the codes and conventions of existing cultural forms to make meaning, the *cinéma vérité* techniques and narrative strategies employed by Pennebaker contribute to the codification of a documentary work whose aesthetic intentionally implies objectivity



**Fig. 2.** Dylan ripostes during his London press conference (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).



(i.e., representative slices of reality seemingly devoid of any subjective choosing of those slices). Dylan and Pennebaker do have messages for their audiences in the revolutionary 1960s; *Dont Look Back* romantically constructs the entertainer as an enigmatic artist and in this way ironically reveals who he really is. Pennebaker's direct cinema technique, however, necessarily constrains this demystification of Dylan. Insofar as the film is intended simultaneously to create and capture Dylan's celebrity persona, we come to know just precisely what Pennebaker and Dylan want us to know about the latter, and not one bit more. It is a narrative technique of personal storytelling that twists John Grierson's caveat:

I always remember that one of the great things about the sophisticated notion of God is that God is to remain unknown. The known God is no damn good. So the known person is no damn good. A person is to remain unknown (Blumer 1970, p. 17).

### **Producing Celebrity History**

As Benson and Anderson (1989, p. 2) point out, a rhetoric of documentary is an engagement in the way meanings are constructed and communicated through the symbolic actions, techniques and processes of the cinematic craft. That is to say, when we look at the documentary as form and function we are invariably reading an ordered cinematic language as a system of signs. It is designed to ensure an exchange of information whereby viewers come to something of a preferred reading as encoded by the director speaking through the work. As the *cinéma vérité* documentary form seeks to communicate authentic moments via an organic system of structural relationships, the process very much follows Burke's (1950, p. 43) definition of rhetoric being "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols." Burke's literary theory works especially well in understanding popular culture celebrity documentaries in that he posits a rhetorical process of the dialectic between identification and division.

For Burke, the inherent separateness of people (division) leads to self-identification. This self-identification gives rise to interests that, in turn, lead to a general unification (conjoining) among what were once separated people. Such conjoining



results in groups of people who are “both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (Burke 1950, p. 21). For both the subject and the audience of the *cinéma vérité* documentary, there is an ever-present negotiation between notions of camera-consciousness and evolving and uncontrollable reality as action. In this sense we understand Pennebaker’s *cinéma vérité* aesthetic in *Dont Look Back* as a system of intentionality producing a social understanding between Dylan and his audience (i.e., Burke’s “socialness”). It is this interconnection (constructed and commodified as it is), that is at the very core of the human condition and the key to the contemporaneous success in building the audience’s identification with Dylan’s celebrity persona as expressed in the film.

For example, we can examine one scene in *Dont Look Back* where Dylan does appear to briefly drop his self-conscious mask, and in the process gives Pennebaker a fleeting instance of the pure direct cinema moment—Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment.” Joan Baez, Dylan’s ex-lover and artistic advocate, is performing a soulful tune late one evening in Dylan’s hotel suite where Dylan, Albert Grossman (Dylan’s producer) and Bob Neuwirth (Dylan’s road manager) are lounging. While she plays, Dylan is typing some notes previously written in longhand. However, try as he might to maintain a sense of detachment to create the sign of indifference, Dylan finds the combined pressures of the provocative camera peering over his shoulder, his rudimentary typing style and aesthetic engagement with the music all too much. As Baez sings, Dylan stops his typing and yields to the strains of the song, his body swaying to the rhythm. Dylan has lost himself from the camera’s presence and pressure; he is at once in the camera’s presence yet distanced from it. Perhaps the music masks the camera’s shutter sounds, or the presence of the lens is lessened by its position from farther behind Dylan’s back, or both (Fig. 3). In any case, with the camera positioned to invoke the audience’s privileged gaze as the Other in the room, Dylan’s body escapes him on all sides and he reveals himself. Presently, as the camera swings around and intrudes on his periphery, Dylan re-establishes his self-conscious relationship with it and resumes his apparent pretence of alienation through typing. He returns to his reflexive



**Fig. 3.** An authentic moment: Dylan yields to Baez's music (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).

self while the audience realizes its position as witnesses to history (Fig. 4). In turn, Dylan and audience conjoin in the pop culture socialness of their being, elevating the scene to the human realm through the cinematic construction of something perceived in a narrative sense to be “authentic” or “genuine.” Hall (1998, p. 247) refers to this specific scene as an example of Pennebaker's documentary technique that “relying on picture logic gets it right.”

### **Documentary Subject/Camera Interface**

With respect to the relationship between the subject and the camera in *Dont Look Back*, Pennebaker (1968, p. 18) stated the year after the film was released:

Neither side quite knows the rules. The cameraman (myself) can only film what happens. There are no retakes. I never attempted to direct or control the action. People said whatever they wanted and did whatever. The choice of action lay always with the person being filmed.



**Fig. 4.** Dylan returns to his reflexive self, ignores Baez (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).

But as performers, do not Dylan, Baez and even Pennebaker know the rules implicitly? In this sense, then, the effort of documentary style in *Dont Look Back* is to obscure its own constructed quality by, in fact, revealing it. The ends are quite the opposite of the Maysles brothers' earlier "on the run" rock and roll documentary *What's Happening! The Beatles in the U.S.A.* (1964), where the relationship between the camera and the subject is overtly self-conscious. By contrast, Pennebaker's un-reflexive approach is evident throughout the film, but it does not entirely succeed. The documentary camera (directed and operated by Pennebaker) is not hidden from view or minimized as an information gathering tool to the subject, as it is in the Maysles' celebrity documentary *Meet Marlon Brando* (1965) or Frederick Wiseman's *Titticut Follies* (1967); rather, it is foregrounded and inscribed into the text as the vehicle by which the filmed subject "will act, will lie, will be uncomfortable" (Eaton 1979, p. 51)—a machine of *cinéma vérité* not to film life as it is, but as it is provoked.

Inasmuch as there exist physical limitations on the information that can be captured during shooting, the director's point

of view must have an effect on the concealment of the implicit rules of behaviour existing between filmmaker and celebrity subject within the final cut. For example, it is problematic both in concept and in practice that Pennebaker expects his subjects to *pretend* they are ignoring the camera, with the hope that through this pretence we will “learn something about them” (Mamber 1974, pp. 180-83). As a method for documentary production, the rhetorical *pretence of pretence* posits that although the wall of self-consciousness is breached by the camera, somehow this breach results in the instantaneous cinematic registration of history. This, in turn, provides for the audience’s perception of “realism” while viewing the filmed subject. As Ruby (1988, p. 64) puts it, “one can become self-conscious without being conscious of that self-consciousness.” It is in this way, in the realm of the documentary, that a sort of ontological construction is made by the audience via the process of identification—in this case, a mediated creation designed for the elevation of Dylan’s celebrity.

Certainly, the volatile social context that surrounded the production of *Dont Look Back*, especially the 1960s counterculture, is obvious in its influence on the gritty textuality of the film itself. As neutral or objective as Pennebaker would like to posit his style of filmmaking, sociocultural codification informs the film—by necessity must inform it—from the beginning. Pennebaker’s choices of film stock and speed, composition (including lens focal length, angle and framing), point of view, movement and other technical considerations, are functions of the interface between the filmmaker and the subject and selections made towards establishing an aesthetic code of realism. For example, the consistently heavy grain of the black-and-white image (an imperative of the wide-ranging, ever-changing lighting contrast ratios) and even the accidental shaking of the camera, all stand as techno-visual signs of the dynamic, if not turbulent, social context of the United States in the 1960s. That is to say, in revealing the production process in the celebrity documentary, the director (and by extension, the subject) imposes “honesty” on the content that the audience reads as “truth” in the narrative.

Therefore, when examining the interface between filmmaker and subject we are attempting to come to terms with how the subject is captured and aesthetically represented by various techno-visual devices and choices of the filmmaker. This relationship, however, becomes tricky when the work is made in the name of the celebrity documentary; that is to say, a cinematic language for the commercial development of a popular culture persona whose on-screen aura is meant to be interpreted as something of an objective reality—as “authentic.” As Marcorelles (1986, p. 268) points out, the documentarian is faced with the perplexity of having to retrieve reality while utilizing a highly subjective point of view:

Certainly (documentary) allows us to look at the world in a way that no other mode of expression has been able to do. But in so doing it makes almost impossible demands on the film-maker, beginning with a refusal to juggle arbitrarily with a reality that exists before we even think of examining it. . . . Its purpose is therefore to reconstitute the unfolding of this reality in all its dimensions, while trying to avoid confusing cinema and reality.

If there must exist an intent to make cogent discourse from pieces of reality, then the politics of that purpose must bias the style, thus the ideologization of content; for the constitution of the subject’s reality-as-history is always, and will always be, so broad as to negate the coverage of its totality by any medium or documentary effort. Rothman (1998, p. 3) takes this a step further in describing the complexity of the documentary camera-subject interface as a hall of mirrors whereby the celebrity subject “has a relationship to the camera that is part of his reality, part of the camera’s reality, part of the reality being filmed, part of the reality on film, part of the reality of the film.” Furthermore, insofar as there is a preferred meaning produced within and by the documentary film, it is conducted through both the film production process and the personal experiences of audiences who watch it. Indeed, film critics who saw *Dont Look Back* on its original release in 1967 appeared to be divided in their analyses of Pennebaker’s technique. Donal Henahan, writing in the *New York Times*, approved in pointing out that:

Much of the film affects an air of being unplanned, and one has the sensation at times of being allowed to peep on the private lives of public idols. This is probably only a directional trick, but it is a realistic one.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Arthur Knight of the *Saturday Review* observed the possibilities of deception in a work that posits itself as a mediator of truth.

Truth, reality, actuality are words with a glowing, resonant ring, but also with an inclination to turn a bit slippery when applied to specifics. . . . *Dont Look Back* is an incomplete portrait, a portrait with gaping and obvious holes. The camera has not told all. But even recognizing this, one must question the validity of much it does tell.<sup>3</sup>

### **Aura as Artefact**

In what could best be called a retrospective moment in *Dont Look Back*, Dylan is shown performing in 1963 in front of a harvest truck containing a group of disenfranchised Mississippi voters who somberly acknowledge his folk music storytelling skills as he sings “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (Fig. 5). It is an allusion to the folk singer tradition of Jimmie Rodgers, Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger—of which, in another ironic twist, Dylan forcefully reiterates throughout the film he is not a part. The harvest truck footage shot by filmmaker Ed Emshwiller is also an appropriation by Pennebaker to impart the nostalgic honesty which the music critic Robert Shelton described as Dylan’s voice in his 29 September 1961 *New York Times* review. This was the review responsible for putting the singer on the pop culture map:

Mr. Dylan’s voice is anything but pretty. He is consciously trying to recapture the rude beauty of a Southern field hand musing in melody on his back porch. All the husk and bark are left on his notes, and a searing intensity pervades his songs.<sup>4</sup>

For Dylan, all personal interactions in the film retreat back to the making of this scene and kindle an aesthetic litmus test: people who think he is a folk singer simply do not get it, do not grasp the nature of purpose found in his art or intel-



**Fig. 5.** Pre-celebrity: Dylan serenades Mississippians (1963, courtesy of Ed Emshwiller).

lect. For both Pennebaker and Dylan, the harvest truck scene exists in the service of what Dyer (1986, p. 45) refers to as the “star-image”—those ironic rhetorical devices in the creation of the celebrity persona which are always “extensive, multimedia, intertextual.” Baudrillard (1981, p. 87) refers to this as “absorption” in which a commodity (Dylan) becomes saturated with various meanings which then make it ever more marketable. Rather than a folk cantor of spiritual tradition, what Dylan presents to his audience, cinematic or otherwise, is a form of Platonic mimesis wherein image occurs only as representation.

Indeed, the use of the long and unedited takes provided by Emshwiller to Pennebaker is somewhat cynical, and certainly misleading, on two counts. First, the scene was staged for the camera, and second, it implies Dylan’s early political association with, if not dedication to, the American Black civil rights movement. As James (2016, p. 210) points out, both notions run counter to direct cinema’s professed fly-on-the-wall technique and reveal the Dylan popular culture persona that is otherwise



repressed in the film. That is to say, the scene veers the audience away from the nascent rock musician star which Dylan already was at the time, while revealing the political side of Dylan which “obsesses the film’s various interlocutors but which he himself refuses to acknowledge” (ibid.).

As further evidence of the constructed quality of the Dylan persona, we see the performance of Albert Grossman, the sly capitalist raconteur hoodwinking the British Broadcasting Corporation by playing it against Granada TV in the hope of doubling Dylan’s television appearance fee. Pennebaker himself would later be the beneficiary of such tenacity on the part of Grossman when they both approached Janus Films to distribute the documentary as a feature, as he states:

I couldn’t believe what went down in that room. It was as if it was the other way around, as if they wanted something from him. He just destroyed them. It wasn’t good-natured at all, but on the other hand, it wasn’t mean. It was like he was looking at their underpants or something, it had a really strange feeling. And it scared me a little bit (quoted in Goodman 1997, p. 93).

Grossman’s scenes are important for several reasons. First, as what Jameson (1990, p. 193) calls “the deconcealment of Being,” the episodes act reflexively to indicate the paradoxical processes of the professional management of musicians, if not implicitly to reveal the production behind the Dylan celebrity persona (Fig. 6). Second, such reflexivity imposes a suggestion of authenticity of the filmmaking process, which is then, with the cohesiveness of indexicality, securely applied to the second half of the film wherein the live performances take place. These aesthetic attributes of authenticity were, in fact, the very same qualities that appealed to the trade papers of the times, as seen, for example, in this unattributed review in the 14 June 1967 edition of *Variety*:

Grossman, with his chubby cherubic face, spectacles, bald head, and long hair, looks like Benjamin Franklin, and curses hotel managers with courtly obscenity. His less flattering vignettes and Dylan’s are all the more remarkable for their honesty as he is one of the film’s producers.



**Fig. 6.** Grossman runs interference with hotel staff as Dylan's celebrity aura glows (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).

In a broader historical sense, however, Grossman's scenes are indices of those popular culture traits whereby tradition is sacrificed to the idols of the market. In addressing this materialist consequence, Gitlin (1998, p. 81) points out that celebration of the celebrity—especially the American celebrity persona—is indicative of the secular origin of cultural power. For Gitlin, the culture of celebrity “borrows its force from the realm of the spirit [and] works on emotions,” and as such is experienced as a transcendent phenomenon: “thus do we speak of stars, possessed of the bright light.”

Dylan, the folk singer, probably understood this better than anyone in the mid-1960s American music scene. With both *Dont Look Back* and the music of Dylan as part and parcel of the ceremonial objects in the service of a pop cult, technical production of their matter becomes the qualitative transformation of their aesthetic natures, thus making the activity of experiencing pop art more important than the art itself. To an extent it is not the content of the historical narrative (performance or otherwise) that emphasizes celebrity importance, but

merely the stars' appearance before the camera that is often the most memorable action. In the same way, the mere act of seeing or hearing Dylan becomes much more valuable than the messages of any of the harangues, in either monologue or ballad form, to which he gives voice throughout the film. On this point, Boorstin (1961, p. 57) frankly states that a celebrity is "a person who is known for his well-knownness."

As Dylan's celebrity aura is transformed through cinematic reproducibility, the commodification of art and artist must act to replace the lost essence of cult ritual or live performance. Idealization of the artist-as-celebrity takes place, and with this transfiguration a circuitous dependency upon the mass-mediated image for the invigoration of celebrity aura. It is a state whereby the celebrity image must reflect back on itself endlessly lest it lose its lustre. The commercial celebrity thus politicized is an emblematic figure, a phenomenon whereby the symbolic meaning of Dylan "the rebel star" supersedes any of his musical performances which actually occur within the film space. These historical performances can only ever be a sampling of the live events: they must rely in mutual dependence upon a larger architecture of meaning that is constructed out of several other publicity opportunities, such as personal appearances, album releases and press coverage. That is to say, the celebrity is the intertextual synergistic result of extensive promotion and cross-promotion via multiple forms of media exposure, all found within the mass culture hall of mirrors. To this end, the documentary film space, as an element of the media mix, becomes through time a place of transformation of both the art and the subject thus filmed. It does so for perceptual and political effect, and by extension to maintain the celebrity aura. Insofar as this aesthetic transformation is for the purpose of profit, Dylan as celebrity is a *made* image and thus a market function—the commodified person(a). For Dyer (1986, p. 5), stars like Dylan are both labour and the product of labour who "do not produce themselves alone" and are mechanically fashioned by the star system out of the "raw material of the person" to produce a marketable commodity.

To be sure, there is a long history in the production of celebrity. For example, a decade before *Dont Look Back*, Mills

Wright (1956, p. 23) pointed out that the procedural selection, creation and glorification of celebrities takes place within systems of mass communication, publicity and entertainment. As a cultural institution of the first order, the entertainment system of popular music exists in a symbiotic relationship with the star personalities who seek to succeed in it. Here is where the preservation of the artist-as-commodity takes place, as well as the validity of the system which engenders the meaning of celebrity. It is a paradigm of signification wherein appearance value trumps performance or, in some instances, even talent itself; and where reproducibility takes precedence over ritual. In addition, Dylan is that professional celebrity who marks the pinnacle of the American star system, a system embedded in a society that fetishizes the differentiation associated with competition. It is for this reason that Pennebaker's (and Grossman's) intentions are quite clear in the constant use of the unflattering commentary on Donovan—Dylan's British artistic foil—employed as a parallel storyline running throughout the film. Indeed, the implication that Donovan's music is a mediocre and saccharine facsimile of Dylan's more heroic work is a significant contributor to the making of Dylan's celebrity image.

In fact, if the gaze of the audience in the 1960s seems to be fixed upon the celebrity of Dylan, they in turn seem to be irrelevant to him. Although Dylan is painted as having sympathy for the struggles of the worker, the persona of Dylan as *star* is never disconnected from his portrayal. When he scolds the drunkard for tossing a glass out of the hotel-room window, Dylan agrees with the inebriate's description of himself as just a "little-noise" when compared to Dylan's "big-noise" professional celebrity status (Fig. 7). In this regard, Dylan is reiterating his point that we, and he, really know nothing about other people. He makes no claims to the special knowledge or wisdom pronounced by the inebriate. Rather, what Dylan does claim is that he is committed to taking responsibility for his own actions. That is the source of his gripe with *Time* magazine and its hapless reporter, Horace Judson, and with the "little-noise" who may or may not have thrown the glass. By contrast, Dylan himself was able to appreciate, in a Millsian effect of commingling, the prestige



**Fig. 7.** Dylan shares verbal jabs with the “little-noise” inebriate (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).

value of the position held by the influential “big-noise” wife of the sheriff of Nottingham (Fig. 8).

### Discussion

Despite Pennebaker’s protestations to the contrary (see, for example, Levin 1971, pp. 240-41), as an exercise in historical bifurcation of Dylan the man versus Dylan the constructed celebrity, *Dont Look Back* is a cinematic stoker of the star-maker machinery. Taking advantage of the emotional faith of the audience in the genuineness of the material being shown on the screen, the film reifies Dylan as a celebrity persona via signs in the process of absorption whereby the summation of all possible meanings in the object informs a final symbolic value or overall concept of celebrity. In an institutionalized corporate mass culture, this symbolic value is then utilized to elevate and perpetuate the fetishization of the commodified celebrity persona (actually, any commodity thus symbolized) through fascination.

To fully understand the relationship between American direct cinema and the construction of celebrity in *Dont Look*



**Fig. 8.** Dylan and Neuwirth commingle with the “big-noise” wife of the Nottingham sheriff (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).

*Back*, it is important to note, as Ellis (1974, p. 540) states, that star images in film are fundamentally paradoxical:

They are composed of elements which do not cohere, of contradictory tendencies. They are composed of clues rather than complete meanings, of representations that are less complete, less stunning, than those offered by cinema. The star image is an incoherent image. It shows the star both as an ordinary person and as an extraordinary person.

The implication here is that the meaning of the popular culture text is increasingly a collaboration between the text’s producer and audience, which is done through a synthesis of various evidentiary narrative fragments offered as testimony of celebrity. Documentary scholars see the vested audience as vital for meaning in *cinéma vérité* and other popular culture texts, especially as it informs celebrity, legend and/or mythology. McGee (1990, p. 279) suggests that films such as *Dont Look Back* are interpreted by viewers in modes of “critical rhetoric” whereby they understand texts to be greater than the “apparently finished discourse

that presents itself as transparent,” and that texts are simultaneously “structures of fragments and finished texts.” Insofar as the contemporaneous audiences of *Dont Look Back* had a part in constructing the meaning of the filmic text, they did so under the rules of engagement already established for popular culture audiences in a maturing 1960s American star system. Ultimately, the sociocultural conditions of the 1960s which gave rise to increasingly monolithic mass culture industries were also the same conditions that spawned the paradoxical celebrity messaging of Bob Dylan as a *superstar* folk singer (Fig. 9).

Whatever Pennebaker’s and Dylan’s original intentions for the film may have been, however—as historical record, commercial tool or even art in the service of mythology—these considerations have changed with time and the longevity of Dylan’s life. Dylan changed. Leaving the radicalism against the system that he vocalized in songs such as “Blowin’ in the Wind” (1963), “Troubled and I Don’t Know Why” (1963) and “Only a Pawn in Their Game” (1964), following the release of *Dont Look Back* Dylan steered for a musically safe harbour. The aesthetic and social changes amongst post-Vietnam American



Fig. 9. A pretence of pretence (*Dont Look Back*, 1967).



youth—from the fetishism of advocacy to the fetishism of corporate capitalism—would be the reason for the temporary dismissal of Dylan’s mythology as the generational voice of social justice. Not until his filmed appearance in the *Concert for Bangladesh* (1972) and his support for jailed prizefighter Reuben “Hurricane” Carter (1975) would Dylan’s radical mythology and celebrity aura be reinvigorated.

Inasmuch as *Dont Look Back* sought to document the musical roots and popular success of Dylan’s politically radical voice, the film follows the dictum that the transient nature of the celebrity-as-fashion necessitates the “eternal recurrence of the new” in the popular culture form of “always the same” (Benjamin 1972, p. 128). In other words, time did not stop for Bob Dylan as it did for Hank Williams, Buddy Holly and Kurt Cobain. When viewed through the kaleidoscope of his life and art, Dylan’s later celebrity persona as wizened entertainer—celebrated by the very establishment he once eschewed—cannot help but underscore the continuing contradictions of Dylan’s mythology established some half-century ago in *Dont Look Back*.

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#### NOTES

1. <http://stage.cologne-conference.de/en/meta/archive/1997/retrospective-donn-a-pennebaker-chris-hegedus/retrospective-donn-a-pennebaker-chris-hegedus/>
2. Donal Henahan, “*Dont Look Back*,” *New York Times*, 7 September 1967.
3. Arthur Knight, “Dylan Doesn’t Look Back,” *Saturday Review*, 9 September 1967.
4. Robert Shelton, “Bob Dylan: A Distinctive Stylist,” *New York Times*, 29 September 1961.

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## RÉSUMÉ

### « Rien qu'un pion dans leur jeu » : la construction de l'image de Bob Dylan dans *Dont Look Back*

Victor Viser

Le cinéma documentaire, comme bien d'autres pratiques artistiques du milieu du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, a articulé le développement de son esthétique autour des notions de « vérité » et de « sincérité » dans la représentation de ses sujets. À la même époque s'est également développée une industrie commerciale de la culture populaire qui s'est souvent approprié cet idéal esthétique d'*authenticité* pour raconter la vie de personnes célèbres. Cet article examine la fabrication de l'image de Bob Dylan dans un film représentatif du cinéma-vérité américain, *Dont Look Back* (Don Alan Pennebaker, 1967). Il utilise une théorie critique fondée sur la philosophie et l'économie politique pour analyser l'intentionnalité de la construction de la célébrité dans les documentaires consacrés à la vie des vedettes de la musique pop. Si *Dont Look Back* tente de présenter Dylan comme une voix rebelle exprimant les préoccupations sociales de son public, il n'en témoigne pas moins de la marchandisation de ces vedettes par une machine médiatique commerciale dont les intentions ultimes ont sans doute peu à voir, quant à elles, avec une quelconque mission sociale.