

Papa Paparazzo

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A GILT-EDGED TRIBUTE TO THE GODFATHER OF CELEBRITY PHOTOGRAPHY.



“A curious grunting sound”: This was the noise emitted by celebrity stalker-photographer Ron Galella whenever he consummated a shot of—perhaps more precisely, *at*—his preferred subject, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, or so she testified during one of their numerous courtroom encounters. You can imagine her delicately wrinkling her nose while saying it. Everything you need to know about Galella is that he was the one who instigated the lawsuit, rather than Jackie: Not content to merely hound her, he also sued her for \$1.3 million, claiming that Secret Service agents (assigned to protect the Kennedy children) were preventing him from doing his job—which, as he construed it, involved trailing the former first lady whenever she left her Fifth Avenue apartment, squeezing off shot after shot while crooning her name. Jackie countersued, claiming that he was terrorizing her. Galella ended up saddled with a restraining order that, true to form, he gleefully violated, arranging for himself to be photographed while doing so. He was nothing short of driven in his pursuit: dating Jackie’s maid to get the personal lowdown on her, bribing her doormen, then tailing her in taxicabs. He showed up at funerals, the theater, and leaped out from behind coatracks at fancy restaurants to capture her startled-doe expression. He saw himself as performing a public service.

Some of the resulting images are included in *Ron Galella: Paparazzo Extraordinaire!* (Hatje Cantz, \$45), a sumptuously produced volume based on a retrospective of his work in Berlin earlier this year. Complete with critical essays by a German critic and a media lawyer, this bilingual edition is a beautiful object in its own right: 200 gilt-edged pages each the weight and thickness of shirt cardboard; 104 gorgeously printed black-and-white images with a running commentary on Galella’s antics over the years. (Though many of the original images were color, the lush black and white confers more artistic gravitas.) Subjects range from Greta Garbo hiding her face behind a handkerchief to Mick Jagger giving the finger to the camera to Sean Penn punching out Galella’s paparazzo nephew.

Clearly many found Galella a pest, but his photos have a compelling immediacy, often capturing something unstudied in these familiar faces, wresting something “real” from a

world of overmanaged surfaces. His most famous shot, of a windswept Jackie, glancing back at the camera with a half smile, has an undeniable aura—it’s hard to take your eyes off her. Galella calls it his *Mona Lisa*, though admits Jackie only smiled because he disguised his voice—she didn’t realize he was the one calling her name.

The term *paparazzo* derives from the name of one of the swarming photographers in Fellini’s *La Dolce Vita*; it’s also supposedly a play on the Italian word for the annoying buzzing of a mosquito. One thing you can say about Galella is that he never feared being annoying, or shirked the hazards. Marlon Brando knocked out five of his teeth when Galella wouldn’t stop photographing him; Galella sued, settling for \$40K, the amount it cost to reconstruct his jaw. Which didn’t prevent him from again lying in wait for Brando following a benefit at the Waldorf-Astoria, though this time he wore a customized football helmet emblazoned with his name.

Now in his early eighties, Galella has been racking up the tributes lately, proving that annoyances who stick around long enough can eventually become cultural darlings—these days his photos hang at MOMA and are collected around the world. What is this salvage process that hoists professional vulgarities who sprout a few gray hairs up the cultural rungs into respectability, rebranding them as benign and lovable figures? In fact, another renowned aggressor against proprieties, the scatological countercultural cartoonist R. Crumb, is currently the subject of a retrospective at the distinguished Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. Why can’t thorns-in-sides just keep on being thorns-in-sides? Do they have to get adoration for it?

OK, so there’s nothing exactly *wrong* with a pervy cartoonist being transformed into a revered figure, though it can be disheartening to watch the former cultural nuisance join in his own rehabilitation, so moved by all the love that he forgets to thumb his nose at it. He begins speaking of his artistic process, his childhood, his personal demons, fitting his story into the overfamiliar templates and sanctimonies his career was once devoted to smashing. I’m reminded of another professional thorn in the side, *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt, who was whitewashed by Oscar-winning director Milos Forman’s biopic, *The People vs. Larry Flynt* (1996), from a cantankerously filthy pornographer into a First Amendment hero.

I met Flynt a couple of times in the mid-’90s—I had written about the class politics of *Hustler* and someone who knew him arranged for us to get together. My own view of Flynt was that he was no liberal reformer: He basically wanted to shit all over every propriety and mock any form of social power or authority (which included, in the topsy-turvy world of *Hustler*, women). He blasphemed, libeled, and defiled, then showed up for court appearances sporting an American flag as a diaper. I found him surprisingly charming on our first meeting (maybe because he described what I’d written about *Hustler* as “feisty,” despite its many potshots at him). When we spoke again, which was after Forman’s film was released, I asked if he thought the movie had cleaned him up too much. He agreed, but added earnestly, “If the First Amendment can protect even a scumbag like me, then it will protect all of you, because I’m the worst.” It was a noble sentiment, but it was also a line directly from the movie—apparently he’d started believing the whitewash. I recall thinking darkly at the time: “That’s how they get you.” If even Larry Flynt could be seduced into spouting such high-minded blather, then no one was safe from the enfeebling effects of cultural respect.

As it happens, both Galella and Crumb have also been the subjects of loving film treatments by award-winning directors. Terry Zwigoff’s Sundance-prize-winning documentary *Crumb* rummages through R. Crumb’s past to locate the wellsprings of his raucously deviant imagery in (surprise!) his tormented family situation. Though I admire this film greatly, the clanking of the cultural elevation machinery is a little

deafening. Watch Crumb being hurtled up from the low-rent cultural precincts of underground comics into the lofty environs of Art, with Zwigoff crosscutting between Robert’s tragically crazy brothers and his cartoons, coasting on the familiar Romantic trope linking artistic inspiration to neurotic and psychosexual origins. Of course, this hasn’t exactly hurt Crumb’s ascent from Comic-Con to the museum walls.

The revisionist process is also clanking away in the 2010 documentary about Galella’s career, *Smash His Camera*, by Oscar-winning filmmaker Leon Gast (*When We Were Kings*). The film premiered at MOMA—fittingly, given the artistic burnish Gast confers on Galella, opening with him in the darkroom actually developing his own prints, then dangling a few standard-issue psychosexual tidbits (his mother was a celebrity devotee; he was named after Ronald Colman). Though the film is mixed on Galella’s legacy—die-hard elitist Thomas Hoving is trotted out to denounce him as an “obscene bottom-feeder”—it’s relentless when it comes to revamping Galella’s slightly creepy Jackie obsession into the more palatable conceit that she was his *muse*. Here things take a sharp turn toward the sentimental, then plummet into sheer mythology. Galella “captured something that was elusive about Jackie,” gushes gossip columnist Liz Smith. “He loved her,” lyricizes magazine editor Bonnie Fuller. Both Jackie and Ron benefited from “this push-me-pull-me thing,” Smith coos. “In the end, she was posing for him—she must have had a little feeling for Ron.”

Really? After Onassis brought Galella back to court for repeatedly violating the previous restraining order and he was threatened with six years in prison if he didn’t desist photographing her (for the rest of her life), it seemed he would be forced to finally abandon his fixation. But no one ever *really* abandons a fixation; we just find creative workarounds. When Ron first spoke on the phone to his now wife, Betty, a photo editor, her voice reminded him of Jackie’s—sort of whispery. They arranged to get together; he proposed marriage within five minutes of meeting her. They went to a motel to consummate the deal (he says), and have been happily married ever since. Their mansion in New Jersey, which makes the Sopranos’ place look modest, is a monument to Galella’s success. The grounds are lavish, replete with Italian gardens, burbling fountains, and an array of spray-painted flowers and polyurethaned topiaries, lovingly planted by Ron himself. (“It’s an utter and absolute humiliation,” says Betty, whose parents were florists.) Galella is also strangely obsessed with rabbits, and in the backyard is a private cemetery for pet rabbits past, replete with a sculpture garden of bunny statues, some as big as full-grown men.

All this cuteness about Ron and his bunnies and flowers is as overdone as the gilt-edged paper of *Paparazzo Extraordinaire!* It’s as though the more unpalatable dimensions of aggression and violation have to be elevated and transformed—as we’ve seen with his fellow vulgarities—into art, patriotism, or cuddliness. But why? All these figures were forerunners of what are now social (and commercial) driving forces: the 24/7 barrage of celebrity gossip, the inundation of cartoonish scatology, pornography on demand—the very fabric of our culture. The fantasy seems to be that once upon a time there were *artisans* of vulgarity, not just the reified transgressions of today. Of course, this yearning for authenticity—even manufactured authenticity—has always been the necessary doppelgänger of commercialization. We want origin stories, faces, wild men, or at least palatable versions of them. As long as the authentic can be reconstituted, even out of the flimsiest of materials, the world still feels livable. Alas, the original sting (or stink) of the work must recede into good feeling. The thorn in the side is plucked. □

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