

# Guest Editorial

Yves Vanderhaeghen

## A ratpack feeding off a ratbag society

**T**HE hypocrisy of newspapers who have refused to publish the pictures of Di trapped in the wreck of her car is second only to that of a public whose gluttony for celebrity gossip and pictures has suddenly vanished behind a mask of moral rectitude. All this while devouring the endless footage of her life and death, brought to you courtesy of the Bastards of the Fourth Estate.

The ratpack of paparazzi that were hounding Di at the time of her death are merely the shocktroops of an image industry which manufactures the fantasies peddled in all popular movies, magazines and newspapers. No one likes what they do, but everyone takes what they offer, addicted as they are to the ongoing soap opera that is *The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

The paparazzi themselves have always been unapologetic about the ruthlessness with which they pursue their pay cheques, and they have little sympathy for attempts to censor the press by tightening privacy laws.

Scumerazzo supreme Phil Ramey, who flogs about 800 pictures a year, says: "I get so tired of these celebrities complaining. If I was making some of the money that these celebrities are making, they could take my picture every day of the week. You know, they spend most of their life trying to get into this business, and then when they get in, they come up with all this bullshit attitude."

"I don't know where it comes from. The public and the photographs have made the celebrities, and all of a sudden they run and hide and act like immature three-year-olds."

Di was the epitome of this ambivalent relationship between celebrities and the media who want a slice of them. A bride of convenience for an ageing prince who talks to trees, she was in her own way a promotional shocktrooper for a stuffy British Royal Family in desperate need of a facelift. That was her job, to make the monarchy look young and fashionable.

She did it with great charm, except when she had to pay the price by relinquishing her right to privacy. Once her life became overrun by the media it was inevitable that she would lash out, which she did more and more often as her relationship with Charles deteriorated and eventually collapsed. But she continued to play the game to the end, alternately using the media to promote her causes and then denying them the quid pro quo by hiding away with her millionaire lover, Dodi al Fayed, who died with her.

The paparazzi appear not to be afflicted with this ambivalence. Of the morality of their job, Tony Brenna, a senior correspondent on the mother of all gossip mags, *The National Enquirer*, has said: "How can you really tear yourself to pieces when there are lawyers who promote law suits to make money, doctors who do unnecessary hysterectomies, big corporations hiding their pollution . . . the police are on the take. Maybe my whole view is down, but where drugs is

the United States' biggest bloody industry – it exceeds the Fortune 500 listed companies, \$90 billion a year now – who the fuck am I to worry about this shit I'm doing? Bottom line: so I chase a few celebrities, so what?"

Well, Di's dead now and their biggest meal ticket is gone, that's what. But in their defence, it was not a paparazzo's foot on the accelerator. It is necessary amid the self-serving hysteria of the moralising multitudes to defend the role of these scavengers of the media industry.

They are a distinct sub-species of photojournalist, as much despised as admired by their colleagues who perch above them on the evolutionary ladder. But their jobs are fundamentally the same, differing only in degree and focus: to stick their noses where they are not wanted. And the difference between the press in general and the public is that the press does in print what everyone does anyway, which is to gossip, carp and gloat over the affairs of men and women.

The paparazzi merely do out loud what everyone thinks about, and the press is the physical representation of what goes on in our minds. The damage they do in the process is not the fact that they invade the privacy of their subjects, but that the pictures they take of indiscretions and private moments are used as a whip to keep society penned within impossibly harsh moral conventions. Di has a lover: Ooooooh! So does Winnie: Aaaaah! So be faithful, be boring, be conservative and the paparazzi will leave you alone. They are in fact the allies of the very moral majority that shrieks its outrage at their excesses.

The truth is that the ratpack thrive because they feed off a ratbag society. One that shamelessly promotes sanitised images of itself that bear no resemblance to a reality that is often contradictory, ugly, irrational and inexplicable. For as long as the people who read *The National Enquirer* and *The Sun* force others to retreat into their private lives to be themselves upon threat of crucifixion, so there will be paparazzi to hunt them down.

Privacy should not have to be a matter of law. People have private lives because the glare of society on their foibles and frailties is unbearable. If private lives were allowed to come out into the open without fear of criticism or persecution, the role of the paparazzi would be made redundant.

The paparazzi did not kill Di, we all did.

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