Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality

Neal Gabler
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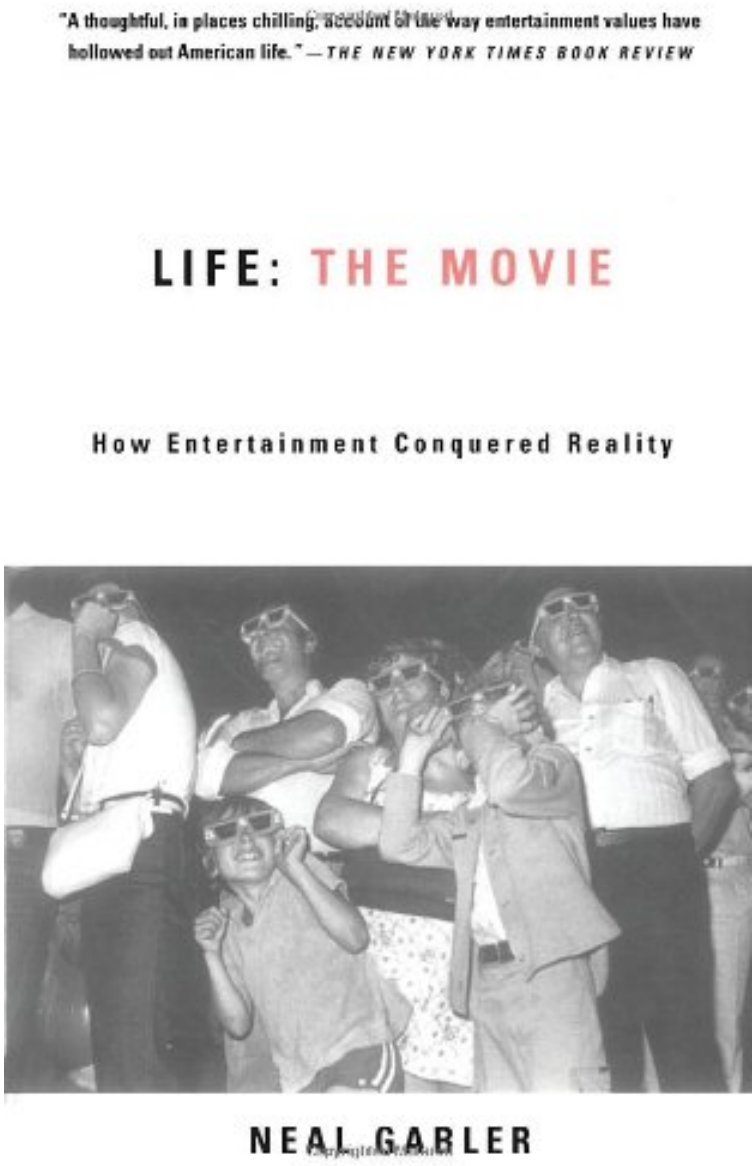

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Neal Gabler : Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Life: The Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality:

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Either you're a star or a nobodyBy Karl J. HansonThis short book is jammed packed with great ideas and beautifully coined phrases. Neal Gabler has synthesized an analysis of how entertainment has influenced our lives. He has a rare talent for social commentary. Extremely well researched and

organized. If you're up to the cerebral challenge, go for it.The thesis begins with an interesting history lesson about entertainment. Life was particularly dull on the farm in the 19th Century. After people moved to the cities, they had time to sit down and get entertained. Movies became America's preferred entertainment pastime. Newspapers morphed into tabloid journalism. Tabloid journalism morphed into television. Eventually reality took a backseat to entertainment on television.The 20th Century's biggest contribution to Art was the invention of the "Celebrity". Celebrities are "famous for being famous". Today we increasingly see professionals - lawyers, engineers, architects, doctors and scientists - vying for celebrity status in their fields. Even inanimate products - Coca-Cola, Nike, Microsoft's Windows - have been "celebritized".We are social animals, adopting the roles that society gives us. Movies and TV present models for dressing, talking and behaving. There are social pressures placed on us to conform to these standards. However, the standards of people shown on "the other side of the glass" are warped and unrealistic. Many people think that their lives are failures if they don't become a celebrity.Gabler makes no conclusions, leaving it to the readers. He does make a brilliant analysis of the philosophical dilemma facing each of us: To seek reality or delusion. Studies have concluded that, from a mental health standpoint, those who live with happy delusions, however unrealistic, seem to live happier lives. Since the 19th Century, there has been a shifting of values from pragmatic realism to a culture that accepts and embraces delusions. These polar opposite viewpoints are the basis of disputing opinions on many issues.This book reminds of another I read many years ago, "The Birth and Death of Meaning", by Ernest Becker, one of my personal heroes. I've circled so many gem phrases in "Life" I will never be able to re-sell my copy.3 of 4 people found the following review helpful. We are what we pretend to be... or are we?By ewomackSome books cause double takes. They thrust reality into a whiplash for which the only sane reaction remains re-evaluation. Such books pull us up from the roots and place permanent filters on our worldly experience. "Life: The Movie," though somewhat cursory, produces this effect. Watch your neck. It pulls our ordinary notions of "entertainment" up from its feet onto its head, shakes vigorously and waits for all pockets to empty. Reality comes out of this wash heavily altered and potentially unrecognizable. It all begins with entertainment.Of course, everyone knows that Americans enjoy entertainment. This facet of American life has even morphed into a trite stereotype, along with obesity and cultural myopia. But many don't know how entertainment came to dominate today's culture and to what extent people may appropriate and embody entertainment itself. After all, people, with their sponge-like relationship to the world, tend to absorb the dominant values of their culture. And when that culture esteems entertainment, people, willingly or not, will tend to base their lives, actions and beliefs on the values posited by entertainment. At first glance this may sound ridiculous, but exchange "entertainment values" for "military values" and the process of value absorption becomes more familiar and coherent. Sparta, to take the classic example, embraced militaristic values. "Life: The Movie" makes the analogous argument that America has become an entertainment culture, or more specifically "The Republic of Entertainment." Consequently, Americans have integrated entertainment into their very lives and conscience. The argument goes light years beyond the notion that Americans merely remain obsessed by entertainment. It claims that life itself has become entertainment, and vice versa.So what does this mean? Basically, through various media, mostly via television and movies, we have all formed images and ideas of what we want to project as "our self" or that we believe really is our identity. We then spend our lives, regardless of reality, shaping ourselves and living up to these images and ideals, which often derive from some extracted entertainment construct. These ideals can also change over time, but still originate from similar sources. A teenager that wants to become a pop star may play the "pop star" role that media or society presents via various conduits and even alter behaviors, beliefs or appearance in hope of "becoming" a pop star. Later in life this same person may take on the role of "CEO" and repeat the role alteration process. In other words, the role becomes the reality, even if it never comes to fruition (which it rarely does in the cases mentioned). Roles may embed themselves so deeply that people may even remake their bodies through surgery to fulfill the fantasies. Going further, these fantasy roles can change us and our perspective on the world. We may, in short, become these roles and live a life of unrequited or partially fulfilled fantasy. We may appear scripted. More succinctly, we become method actors playing ourselves, or playing roles conforming to who we think we are or want to be. Troubling questions of identity can arise.These roles occur in what the book calls "lifies" or "life movies" that provide narrative shape to the roles we choose to play. People desiring pop stardom will attempt to live as though their role inhabits a "lifie" that concludes with their seemingly inevitable success. Actual success, or even potential success, is not a prerequisite for playing the role. These "lifies" borrow their form, looks, beliefs, actions and narratives from entertainment media. We may thus live as though we're enacting a retroactive biography of our assured life of success, complete with an expected "happy ending" that may never come. On this topic, the book quotes Sam Shepard, who states the issue with laconic clarity: "People here / have become / the people / they're pretending to be." We have been raised to perform in life. We may even take on various roles given different circumstances throughout a regular day. The book raises startling questions about personal identity in the consumer age as well as evoking complicated questions about just who we are. Are we merely actors? Is the meaning of life to act?"Life: The Movie" leads up the these ideas with a historical survey of how entertainment came to dominate culture and identity. The story begins with the age worn dichotomy between art and entertainment in the 19th century United States, which culminated in the 1847 Astor Place Opera house riots in which 22 people were killed. Opinions on acting methodology

provided a subtext for the violence, but these opinions were also divided on social class, "high" versus "low." Journalism extended entertainment to life via the "penny press" which arguably sensationalized the news to sell papers. Life dramas were played out in print almost daily and publishers found that people preferred a personal dramatic touch to a deep non-personal analysis of news, events or opinions. So this trend continued and expanded until a primordial celebrity culture emerged. As the technology of photography developed, publishers started filling pages with photos, which many readers seemed to prefer to print. The image culture was born and papers became "fun" to read. "Lifies" appeared in tabloids as early as 1919's Illustrated Daily News." Gradually the news media took on aspects of entertainment and people seemed to read newspapers for entertainment rather than for information. The seeds were planted as early as the 19th century, though many today think that our "infotainment" culture began only recently.Movies and television upped the stakes. These media, in Bazin's terms, "strove to replicate reality completely." Television in particular turned everything into entertainment. The visual and distinctly narrative nature of these new technologies allowed viewers to apply them to their own lives. Then life itself became entertainment as people watched the romanticized lives of media personalities unfold in theaters and in living rooms. As these figures dominated attention using the techniques of entertainment, politics also appropriated these same techniques. Image became primary. Issues, being boring compared to life dramas, were largely marginalized. JFK was amongst the first of the "image" or "star" presidents. Media coverage then revolved around the "best show." These ideals even bled into book publishing, sports, fine art and academia. The ethos of entertainment seemed to permeate everything.All of this ushered in the era of "famous for being famous" celebrities, which Zsa Zsa Gabor epitomized. Everyone seemed to know who she was, but no one really knew why they knew who she was. The point wasn't accomplishment, it was publicity. So people strove to great heights to receive media coverage and the media, in a nearly mind-numbing recursion, covered people attempting to get media coverage. The era of Barbara Walters' often melodramatic celebrity interviews arrived. These were "lifies" presented to millions of viewers. Those with the best "lifie" prevailed, so entertainers like Madonna "made [their] life movie about [their] life movie." The point then became artifice. For many life became the race of receiving publicity. And since those with the best "lifies" received the best coverage, people obviously tried to create the best "lifies" for themselves. The act dominated completely, though often presented as "reality." Celebrity became available to more people through sensationalized talk shows. Even unknowns could appear if they had a good story, no matter how self-deprecating. Celebrity became mostly about the person or their persona. Reality didn't seem to matter anymore. This process culminated in Micheal Jackson who subverted his entire being to entertainment, even his physical appearance.As media "lifies" dominated, people began to relate on a personal level to these fantastic and highly publicized narratives and reflected them onto their own lives. As celebrities have a narrative and a role, so apparently do people. Life became, and has become, largely about performance and personality. People find comfortable roles to play that paralleled the "people" experienced in the media. Attention-getting requires a good "lifie." We have become real life actors.Those who find these ideas convincing may also find them disturbing and frightening. Surely we have distinct identities regardless of what life throws at us? The book provides a surprising twist at the end: it does not present a moral value judgment, but leaves it to the reader. A short section even covers the positive side for role-playing as potentially psychologically healthy. We may need illusions in certain circumstances, though never delusions. But do such positive arguments, such as some of the studies cited, merely reflect the culture in which they took place? Rather than dictate conclusions, the book christens the debate between "realists" and "postrealists." The substance of this debate revolves around whether or not an entertainment-engorged life is destructive. The book presents no answers, nor does it pretend to claim to."Life: The Movie" presents a mere taste of its subject matter. Complete coverage would entail volumes. As such, it presents an invaluable perspective on our entertainment culture. And though it appeared in 1998, its themes still ring true today, even though many of the now dated references may not. The book raises important questions, explicitly and implicitly, about people's place in the world and society. It also has the power to make us question ourselves on a fundamental level and evoke that eternal question "who am I?" In the end, do we really know? Or do we just pretend to know?2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. I highly recommend this bookBy Storyteller7I highly recommend this book. Have you wondered how the entertainment world of "make-believe" conquered REAL LIFE? This is an excellent treatment of that highly meaningful subject.

The story of how our bottomless appetite for novelty, gossip, and melodrama has turned everythingnews, politics, religion, high cultureinto one vast public entertainment. Neal Gabler calls them "lifies," those blockbusters written in the medium of life that dominate the media and the national conversation for weeks, months, even years: the death of Princess Diana, the trial of O.J. Simpson, Kenneth Starr vs. William Jefferson Clinton. Real Life as Entertainment is hardly a new phenomenon, but the movies, and now the new information technologies, have so accelerated it that it is now the reigning popular art form. How this came to pass, and just what it means for our culture and our personal lives, is the subject of this witty, concerned, and sometimes eye-opening book. "A thoughtful, in places chilling, account of the way entertainment values have hollowed out American life." --The New York Times Book Review

.com In Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality, Neal Gabler traces the evolution of high and low culture in American society through the 19th and 20th centuries, and describes how low-brow entertainment became so influential in the United States. This is his central argument: "It is not any ism but entertainment that is arguably the most pervasive, powerful, and ineluctable force of our time--a force so overwhelming that it has finally metastasized into life." Although Gabler uses the word "metastasized," he doesn't seem to regard infotainment as a cancer that is destroying our society, but rather as something that grows rapidly and certainly worthy of close study. The scope of Gabler's investigation extends far beyond the movies to publishing, television news, paint brands, fashion--anything that seems to have been transformed by the national passion for low-brow entertainment. Along the way, Gabler raises a series of intriguing questions: Why do some people feel more passionately about celebrities than about their own loved ones? Why is Donald Trump a celebrity? Why was the broadcast of the 1996 Olympics packed with so many biopics that the sporting events seemed afterthoughts? Why does Ralph Lauren call the blue paint he sells "Lap Pool Blue"? Movies promote the fantasy that there are simple narrative solutions for all of life's problems. Movies are full of sex, scandal, gossip, and action. If our lives were movies, they would be more full of what Zsa Zsa Gabor once called "enchanting make-believe." In this book, Gabler demonstrates how this fantasy has shaped our society. --Jill MarquisFrom Publishers WeeklyEven before the first tabloids began hawking true-crimes stories and trashy melodramas to 19th-century readers, mass entertainment had cast a spell over American life. How that spell has been magnified to such an extent that entertainment is now "the most pervasive, powerful and ineluctable force of our time" is the subject of Gabler's slashing, sometimes dubious, critique. "Entertainment" for Gabler (Winchel: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity) is virtually any kind of public fantasy or performance that, in contrast to high art, serious thought or gritty reality, is meant to appeal to the widest possible audience. America has become an "Entertainment Republic," he writes, in which lives are lived for the media, events are staged for the media and no public institution is uninfected by the "ebola virus" of mass entertainment. Gabler has a keen eye for the absurd detritus of cultural history; he skillfully interweaves events as different as the murder of Helen Jewett in 1836 and the ongoing Clinton scandals (both are "lifies," media spectacles "written in the medium of life"), and individuals as different as Buffalo Bill Cody, who rode into battle in Hollywood costume, and the surgically reconfigured Michael Jackson, "a posthuman for the era of postreality." This is no linear history, however, but a grab bag of ideas and events, larded with citations to a huge array of critical thinkers (e.g., Daniel Boorstin, Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman). Entertainment is certainly a handy concept to explain how the media has changed how we live and think. But readers will find Gabler's tendency to boil American history down to this one master narrative reductive to be an often fascinating but far from persuasive trip down a rabbit hole of cultural theory. From Library JournalShakespeare warned us that all the world's a stage, and now Gabler provides evidence that fiction and reality have become inextricably intertwined in 20th-century America. He argues that a steady stream of public relations manipulations and escalating media hype have created a situation in which life has become a form of show business and the real-life drama of events like the O.J. Simpson trial or the investigation of President Clinton have become just part of our popular entertainment. Other peoples' lives, especially celebrities, have become an ever-larger source of escape for ordinary people. Gabler, whose biography Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity (LJ 9/15/94) explored the development of mass celebrity culture, states that entertainment has now become the "primary value of American life." In his view, this development has negative consequences for American society. An engaging and well-written analysis that should stimulate conversation about the state of contemporary society; recommended for public and academic libraries.?Judy Solberg, George Washington Univ., Takoma Park, MD