

# The Stars in Our Eyes

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Art History and Creative Writing

## A personal response to *Superstar* by Séraphine Pick, 2015.

The first love of my life did not truly exist. This is not to say that the person I fell in love with was not a real person. Rather, the love itself was a fantasy, a figment of my own imagination. Nevertheless, it was an intense affair, beginning with a brief encounter, and quickly blossoming into a fully-fledged romance (or, as my parents would come to call it, an *obsession*). I plastered pictures of my loved ones face to every inch of my bedroom walls, creating a grotesque shrine. I wrote songs about this person, I wrote fan letters. I made it my mission to know everything that there was to know about them, fostering an infatuation so intense that it now causes my body to physically recoil with embarrassment.

The cult of celebrity is a feature of contemporary society that wields an unprecedented amount of power over the obsessed individual. We have come to idolize certain desirable human beings not only for their talents, but also (perhaps more importantly) for who we think they are. Séraphine Pick's large-scale painting *Superstar* conveys the intensity of our cultural obsession with celebrity figures. Standing before the work is an immersive experience, like being hurled into an icy ocean. It entralls and absorbs. It invites us to enter into the psyche of the crowd, to bask in the presence of the admired superstar.

Looking at it, I am transported back to my first concert experiences. A sea of bodies surrounds me; I am being crushed between them. They jostle and wrestle and sway. There is a buzz of excitement in the air, bordering on anxiety. Everybody is desperate to be in the front row. They grapple to reach out and touch the arm occasionally offered by the superstar, as if the feeling of skin upon skin would leave a trace of his

or her greatness; as if it would confirm that the object of desire really is human too. The intense blue is reminiscent of the monochrome paintings of Yves Klein. Limiting the colour palette to such an electrifying hue is mesmerizing in quite an inexplicable way. It is a colour full of energy, and yet this energy does not ward the viewer off. Rather it creates, like Klein's paintings, a sense of boundlessness that invites the viewer into its utopian world full of endless possibilities.

Love is never a rational sensation. When people fall in love with celebrities, it is an even more irrational thing, because the object of that love is a perfect version of a human being who does not truly exist. The celebrity chosen becomes the center of a fantasy, onto which the desires of the fan are projected. While in reality the celebrity figure is unknowable and completely out of reach, in an individual's fantasy they can become completely knowable, and are put within reach. The fan is able to possess the celebrity for themselves, to form whatever relationship with this fantasy figure that they desire. The Internet has broken down pre-existing barriers. It has allowed us access to a multitude of information. We can conduct an online search for a celebrity and be immediately satisfied with pictures, videos, filmographies, discographies, every piece of information one could hope to know. Pick's awareness of the Internet's vital role in this strange cultural phenomenon, and her use of a photograph from the Internet as source imagery for this painting, makes *Superstar* both about, and also of, the contemporary age that we now live in.

*Superstar* is in many ways a fantastical image. The downward brushstrokes create the sensation of being cleansed in a spectral rainfall. The painting conveys the intense longing to be near the superstar, to know everything about them, and perhaps to be metamorphosed into them. There is a sense of the individual transcending reality, almost leaving her own body to rejoice in the music, and in the feeling of being present in the same space as the superstar. Celebrity worship is considered to be an abnormality, a psychological condition. And in many ways, this kind of obsession makes no logical sense. It can only truly make sense to the one that is obsessed. It cannot be at all theoretically justified, because individual emotion and desire is not something that can be accessed or logically explained. Desire of all kinds has a mystical quality to it. *Superstar* has visually captured the feeling of what it is to worship a celebrity—a feeling that is so difficult to put into words.

Celebrity worship fulfills the desires of the fan, and nobody else. It may in fact have very little to do with the actual celebrity as a person, and more with the *idea* of them that has been created by the fan. The face of the girl in the center is the only one that is fully realised in Pick's painting. She is placed beneath a spotlight, emphasizing that *she* (and not the faceless and nameless superstar) is the true focus of this painting. By extension, the girl is also the focus of her own obsession. She has, through fantasy projected onto the superstar, created an image of where she wants herself to be.

At the same time that it is entrancing, the painting disturbs. There is desperateness to the desire of the people surrounding the main figure. Hands emerge like talons, aching to touch the desired object. They have been effaced, and are therefore made all the more terrifying.

Years after my first love fizzles out, I take my sister to a concert, where the celebrity she now loves strums his guitar and sings; yet the screams of adolescent girls all around me drown out his every word. I am an outsider in this crowd. I am experiencing these adolescents' obsession, yet I am not a willing participant. It is like being in a human washing machine—surrounded by other damp and dirty bodies, unable to escape. Girls faint on each side of me, they have to be pulled out and doused with water. I want to be lifted out of there too, to a cool, quiet place, where there is no sweating, no yelling, no pulling of hair. I think about how terrifying life must be for this man on the stage: to be followed and screamed at and tackled every day of his life, probably even when he is just walking, head down, to the corner store to buy a pint of milk.

I have never met a superstar. They have ceased to interest me. I had practically forgotten about that brief time in my life where I thought I was in love with one of them, and then I came upon Pick's painting, which was hanging on the second floor of the Kelburn library. I had forgotten, not the fact of my obsession, but what this obsession really *felt* like. This painting gripped me. *Superstar* is incredible not only for its profound social commentary or for its transfixing aesthetic, but also for the aura it projects and the sensations it evokes—the sensation of both euphoria and

claustrophobia that accompanies the act of loving somebody so completely unattainable. This kind of love is unhealthy, and yet it is a far more common affliction of modern society than we may normally think. It is the result of many drastic transformations that have taken place in the last one hundred years, and is entirely of our time.

The Superstar has risen, and along with it, those who blindly follow.