

Christian Bale's Account of a Profane Tirade: Salvation or "Bale-out?"



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Everybody makes mistakes. It is an undisputed claim. Everyone has been in the unfortunate position of error and wondered how to respond to mend the untoward act and repair a damaged relationship. In the introduction of *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*, William Benoit says people frequently communicate to “reduce, redress, or avoid damage to their reputation (or face or image) from perceived wrong-doing.”¹ Further, he explains that since we typically value our reputation, we not only want “a healthy image of ourselves but we want others to think favorably of us as well.”² While all people have image management concerns, a celebrity’s image is vital to his or her success. In *Entertainment Weekly*, Josh Rottenberg reports one producer said that a celebrity’s career might be threatened if he or she loses popularity due to untoward behavior. “It may hurt [a celebrity’s] career if people decide, ‘You know, I don’t like him so much anymore.’ Call it the Russell Crowe effect (Crowe hurled a phone at a hotel

employee in 2005).”³ To complicate matters for celebrities, their actions are watched closely and reported eagerly, making them vulnerable to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Los Angeles radio disc jockeys expressed their sentiments for this phenomenon. “Yeah, we have a special appreciation for mistakes that we make and then they come back to haunt us on tape and get played over and over again, and that s---s... It’s a good thing all of us don’t have our worst moment taped and, you know, put out there for everyone to hear because that would be embarrassing for us.”⁴



Actor Christian Bale has an appreciation for mistakes that come back to haunt. Sociologist Erving Goffman seems prophetic describing Bale’s situation.⁵ Goffman says when an actor (person) experiences an “interruption in impression management,” it is called an “incident.” He continues, “Some scenes occur when teammates can no longer countenance each other’s inept performance and blurt out immediate public criticism of the very individuals with whom they ought to be in dramaturgical co-operation.”⁶ In July 2008, on the set of the movie, *Terminator Salvation*, this is exactly what happened. Director of photography, Shane Hurlbut walked back and forth on the set, trying to fix a lighting problem during a scene Bale was performing. Annoyed, Bale stopped the scene and hurled angry profanity at Hurlbut. Grobman reports that Bale used the “F” expletive forty times in the four-minute tirade.⁷ This incident, described as “so venomous, it will be hard for [Bale] to live down,”⁸ was recorded, and the following February—seven months later—was posted as an audio on the Internet. On February 3, it also hit the radio waves, and the parodies began.



The incident, followed by the parodies, led to an unusual phone call to a Los Angeles radio station on Friday, February 6, 2009, in which Bale accounted for his behavior. The account Bale gave during the phone call will be the focus of this paper.

Christian Bale has enjoyed a successful acting career. At age twelve, “Steven Spielberg picked Bale out of 4,000 other young actors to play the part of Jim Graham in *Empire of the Sun* (1987).”⁹ Bale is described as “one of the few actors in Hollywood whose child stardom has successfully translated to steady and respectable adult employment.”¹⁰ In 2005, Bale landed the role of Batman in *Batman Begins*, which placed him securely in the ranks of actors with box office hits behind their names.¹¹ Although Bale’s persona tends to be cool and aloof, also described as “temperamental,” his angry tirade generated public disappointment and a profusion of parodies on a variety of media shows.^{12,13} Specific citations would minimize the extent of the parodies. Searching “Christian Bale parodies” in Google and YouTube yields overwhelming results. Bale’s reputation, the parodies, and his spontaneous apology make this account a notable artifact for image repair analysis. In this essay, I ask the questions: *How does a successful actor with a long and respected career overcome an incident in which he is largely considered villainous and spiteful? What might he say to attempt to correct the situation and, most importantly, restore his image in the public eye to sustain his career?*



In this paper, I will first review literature regarding celebrity image restoration and describe image repair theory that Benoit details in *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*.¹⁴ Then I will apply the theory to Christian Bale’s account and analyze the strategies Bale utilized. Finally, I will evaluate Bale’s account and discuss implications of my findings.

Image Repair and Celebrities

Benoit claims image repair discourse is plentiful for politicians and corporations, and is less so for celebrities.¹⁵ He reasons politicians and corporate leaders are more often called to account because their decisions have a stronger impact on the public’s lives, whereas consequences of an entertainer’s actions are not viewed as seriously. However, there are three relevant studies in this category.



In the first study, Benoit and Hanczor analyze the account of figure skater, Tonya Harding, after an attack on fellow skater, Nancy Kerrigan, before the Olympic games in 1994.¹⁶ Harding was interviewed on *Eye-to-Eye* by Connie Chung. Benoit and Hanczor report Harding employed bolstering, denial, and attacking her accuser during the interview.¹⁷ They evaluate Harding's efforts as "weak and ineffective," based largely on inconsistent statements that reduced her credibility; a lack of demonstrating beyond words how she would give back to the skating community (specifically to the Special Olympics), and never expressing mortification. "She never said she was sorry for lying."¹⁸

Next, Benoit presents actor Hugh Grant's account of his arrest for lewd conduct with a prostitute. Before the incident, Grant was scheduled for several interviews to promote his new movie, *Nine Months*. Benoit reports that instead of cancelling his appearances in light of public disapproval, Grant used these shows as an opportunity to repair his damaged image.¹⁹ What can easily be imagined as personally excruciating, Grant spoke with interviewers on *The Tonight Show*, *Larry King Live*, *The Today Show*, *Live with Regis and Kathie Lee*, and *The Late Show*. Benoit evaluates Grant's image restoration attempts favorably. While employing bolstering through word and persona, and attacking his accusers only as far as it hurt his innocent family and loved ones, Grant importantly "chose to apologize rather than to make excuses for his behavior."²⁰

Finally, in an "unprecedented" account, Benoit and Brinson report the discourse of Queen Elizabeth responding to the tragic death of Princess Diana in 1997.²¹ It is unprecedented because the Queen does not regularly speak publicly, and the speech, along with other actions she felt compelled toward, were not "rules of royal protocol," not even for the deaths of previous kings and queens.²² Ultimately, the Queen spoke in response to the harsh criticism from the people in an attempt to sustain her positive image. Benoit and Brinson evaluate Queen Elizabeth's discourse positively. They point out that simply giving the speech acted as her strongest statement of denial to the charges that the royal family did not care about Diana's death, or the grief of the people. The Queen bolstered through expressions of "heartfelt emotions [and] selfless motives" for her grandchildren.²³ She did not apologize, but demonstrated defeasibility by stating her strong emotions were "difficult to surmount," which offered a reason for her slow reaction to come to the emotional aid of her people.²⁴



Each of these studies illustrates how these celebrities used different strategies to repair their images. Likewise, Christian Bale used his own particular strategies. Next, I will explain how these strategies were categorized.

Christian Bale's Image Repair Strategies

To analyze Christian Bale's account, I first listened to a recording of his telephone conversation with Kevin and Bean found on KROQ's website. I then transcribed that conversation. The transcript is in Appendix A. Then I coded Bale's statements according to Benoit's typology of image restoration, the explanation of which will follow. Finally, I synthesized the accounts to help explain how Bale's accounts may or may not be viewed as successful.

After extensive research and synthesis, Benoit presents a highly accepted theory of image restoration. It is divided into five categories, including sub-categories, or strategies.²⁵

Table I: Summary of Benoit’s image restoration strategies

| | |
|---|---|
| Denial | I didn’t do it It didn’t happen They did it |
| Reducing responsibility of the actor | |
| <i>Provocation</i> | I was provoked by an untoward act directed at me |
| <i>Defeasibility</i> | I didn’t know I couldn’t control myself/the situation |
| <i>Accident</i> | It was an accident |
| <i>Good intentions</i> | I meant well |
| Reducing offensiveness of the act | |
| <i>Bolstering</i> | I’m a good person I do many good things |
| <i>Minimization</i> | The situation is overblown It isn’t so bad |
| <i>Differentiation</i> | I’m not slandering, I’m discussing I’m not angry, I’m under duress |
| <i>Transcendence</i> | My actions were true to my beliefs |
| <i>Attack the accuser</i> | They framed me They have something to gain from me |
| <i>Compensation</i> | I will pay for my error to those I hurt |
| Corrective action | This will not happen again I am a changed person |
| Mortification | I am wrong I deeply regret my actions I seek forgiveness |

Benoit says these strategies are used when two conditions are satisfied: “1) An act occurred which is undesirable, 2) You are responsible for that action.”²⁶ It appears Christian Bale’s incident fits securely within these prescribed conditions. Accordingly, he took steps to “repair [his] damaged reputation.”²⁷ He did so in a most unusual way.

From the time the rant was heard publicly, the parodies flourished. It seems there were endless jokes and illustrations of Bale’s poor behavior and foul language. It was fodder for talk show hosts and became the crown jewel of YouTube. In the midst of this harsh climate, four days after his rant had been posted on the Internet, Bale made his account. *The Los Angeles Times* reported, “On Friday morning (February 6), Bale surprised both his own publicist and Warner Bros., the studio behind both *Terminator Salvation* and the *Batman* franchise... and called into FM radio station KROQ with a *mea culpa*.”²⁸ KROQ disc jockeys, Kevin and Bean, had been using a voice talent to impersonate a parody of Bale. They had no idea the real Christian Bale would greet them that morning with, “Hello there, guys. How you doin’ fellas?”²⁹



According to Benoit’s image restoration typology, Bale does not employ any strategies of **denial**, **evading responsibility**, or **corrective action**. He does concentrate on several strategies that **reduce the offensiveness** of the act, and he expresses **mortification**. I have arranged this section according to the frequency of his use of strategies. First, Bale **reduces the offensiveness** of the act by *bolstering*, and employs a wide variety of bolstering techniques throughout the interview. Second, *differentiation* is also a key strategy Bale uses liberally. Third, he subtly *attacks his accusers*. Next, Bale uses *minimization* in two ways: directly and indirectly. He employs direct minimization minimally, but in an unusual backdoor approach, he applies indirect minimization liberally. The only strategies Bale does not use to

reduce offensiveness of the act, according to Benoit’s typology, are *transcendence* and *compensation*. Finally, Bale expresses **mortification**, and fully accepts responsibility for his actions.

The first two strategies that Bale uses most, *bolstering* and *differentiation*, serve as a telling preview as to what to expect, or the trends in Bale’s account. For example, Benoit cites Ware and Linkugel’s identification of four “postures of self-defense,” depending on the concentration of image restorative strategies employed.³⁰

Table 2: Four Postures of Self Defense

| |
|--|
| Absolutive: denial and differentiation |
| Vindicative: denial and transcendence |
| Explanative: bolstering and differentiation |
| Justificative: bolstering and transcendence |

Besides expressing mortification and owning his actions, Bale’s account is most heavily weighted on bolstering and differentiation. It follows then, from the above description that Bale’s account will not likely absolve him, vindicate him, nor justify his behavior, but it will best *explain* what may not have been apparent to the audience regarding his four-minute tirade.

Bale also uses several strategies to reduce the offensiveness of his blow up as well as asking for forgiveness. Let’s begin by exploring the several varieties of bolstering he employed.

Bolstering

Benoit describes bolstering as a strategy “to strengthen the audience’s positive feelings toward the accused offsetting the negative feelings toward the wrongful act.”³¹ He explains, “Rhetors may describe positive characteristics they have or positive acts they have done in the past.”³² In addition to the rhetor’s own description, Benoit illustrates bolstering may be unspoken as well as spoken. For example, he describes Hugh Grant’s “boyish” humor and “impressions of honesty” as effective bolstering techniques.³³ Christian Bale uses this wide range of tactics abundantly to bolster his image. The following are eight distinct ways in which Bale bolsters.



Contrary to his cool, temperamental reputation, Bale bolsters his image continuously during his account. First, Bale employs several non-verbal tools to bolster. He displays friendliness. This is accomplished with an up-beat tone, the use of a higher pitch, and a casual, complimentary verbal stance, “Listen, I spoke to you guys a few years back. You seem like good guys and I wanted to talk with you about it.” Born “far west of South Wales,” Bale also speaks with a British accent.³⁴ Let’s face it, Americans, in general, are charmed by a British accent, and Bale makes good use of his. This was an interesting choice considering he was speaking to an American audience, especially considering his actor’s ability to use accents at will.

Next, at the beginning of the interview, Bale promises to “behave himself,” presumably by keeping his language appropriate. There are noticeable pauses during the interview when Bale apparently searches for an appropriate word when an inappropriate word seems likely. Even when the disc jockeys supply the inappropriate word, Bale remains true. For example:

CB: I’m a lucky—I don’t want to swear—I’m a lucky...
 DJ: SOB, right?
 CB: ...lucky at what I do

In this way, Bale bolsters his image by keeping his promise of good behavior, even when it appears challenging to do so. This is especially relevant considering the cause of his account. It was the intensity of his incessant profanity that led him to this point in the first place, and he is illustrating he can, indeed, “behave.”

A third way Bale bolsters his image is by expressing an interesting combination of statements. First he expresses emotional pain. “I had a miserable week...” and he emphasizes, “nobody has heard that tape that is hit harder by it than me.” On the heels of the pain, he thanks the disc jockeys for easing his burden saying, “I was driving in the car...and you made me laugh.” The disc jockeys respond, “I find that hard to believe. Really?” The disc jockey’s disbelief indicates they expected their cutting humor would create more pain, not less. Bale’s expression of emotional pain because of his behavior is then intensified with the disc jockey’s personal jabs. This is a potent combination of expressions that invite the audience to feel sympathy. Sympathy is an important aspect of bolstering. When disdain or anger is replaced by sympathy, it softens the viewpoint of the audience, thereby bolstering the image of the speaker. Additionally, Bale’s expression of humor indicates good will by not taking himself too seriously and, importantly, implies he does not hold ill will toward his attackers, all of which bolster his image.



Fourth, Bale also bolsters with this question: “I ask everybody to sit down and ask themselves: have they ever had a bad day? Have they ever lost their temper and really regretted it immensely?” Any honest person can answer in the affirmative. Of course everyone has bad days and regrets things said and done. It is the very reason Benoit wrote *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies*.³⁵ This question invites the audience to empathize by realizing they are not immune from bad days either, and no one would want to be in Bale’s position, publicly accounting for an incident that was privately enacted and privately resolved. Empathy, like sympathy, puts the audience on a level playing field with Bale, which helps to bolster his image.

Fifth, Bale bolsters by illustrating he and Shane have risen above the act. “We have resolved this completely; that very day... We not only kept working that day, we worked together for at least a month after that—every single day. We saw each other two weeks back and we worked together then... Everything is resolved between us. There is no problem whatsoever.” The suggestion of a quick reconciliation not only diminishes the incident, but also invites the audience to see Bale as a person who can quickly regain confidence and restore relationships, which serves to bolster Bale’s image.

Sixth, Bale also employs modesty to bolster. He asks, “Can you let me make a few comments?” This is a humor irony. International celebrity, Christian Bale, is live on the phone with local California disc jockeys, and he asks permission to make a few comments! By immediately placing himself in a one-down position, Bale clearly expresses humility. Bale says he has been accused of thinking he is better than others and increases his humility by saying, “If I do start acting like I’m better than anybody else, stick a fork in my (pause) backside and turn me over. I will be done.” This suggests vulnerability by leaving his fate in the hands of others, although he does not express whom those others may be. He also expresses modesty saying, “[*Terminator*] is a great movie.” This indicates he is not great, but he is associated with something great, and this helps bolster his image.

Seventh, importantly, Bale bolsters his image by complimenting the target of his attack, Shane Hurlbut. “I absolutely believe in Shane’s capability. He’s done a wonderful... professional job on that movie.” Bale extends his compliments to the entire crew, “I appreciate [all the crew members] who worked so hard.” These statements bolster Bale’s image by inviting the audience to view him as a nice guy who gives credit to others.



Table 3: Bale’s Bolstering Strategies

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|---|
| 1. Nonverbal tools: friendly, upbeat, English accent |
| 2. Promises to behave: pauses to find appropriate words |
| 3. Shows sympathy: expresses “emotional pain” |
| 4. Shows empathy: asks the audience to place themselves in his situation |
| 5. Restores relationships: remains friends with Shane |
| 6. Displays modesty: asks permission to comment |
| 7. Compliments his ‘target’ |
| 8. Expresses Appreciation |

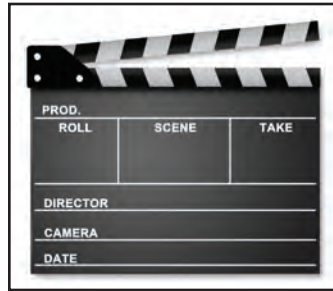
Finally, the appreciation Bale expresses to the movie crew is followed by with an expression of appreciation to the disc jockeys, “Ok, guys, thank you so much for taking the time,” and, “I also appreciate you making fun of it, you know, I had it coming. Feel free to make fun of me at my expense. I deserve it completely... Thanks very much for listening to me.” These final statements bolster Bale’s image by combining his friendly tone, humility, ability to laugh at himself and appreciation for the disc jockey’s valuable time.

This section demonstrates the wide variety of strategies Bale used to bolster his image. Bale employed the sound of friendly charm, kept his promise of good behavior by using appropriate language, expressed pain which solicited sympathy, invited empathy, painted a picture of himself as someone who can restore relationships quickly, demonstrated modesty and expressed appreciation for others, including the surprised disc jockeys themselves. Bolstering was the major strategy used by Bale during his account.

Differentiation

Differentiation is another strategy of reducing the offensiveness of an act. It is described by Benoit as distinguishing the act performed “from other similar but more offensive actions.”³⁶ Commonly, differentiation redefines or redirects the person or the untoward act into a different category. Differentiation is identified second here due to its liberal use, only after bolstering, in Bale’s account.

Bale uses differentiation in four notable ways. First he uses differentiation to help define who he is. “I’m not comfortable yet with this notion of being a ‘movie star.’ I’m an actor.” Through differentiating his career, he portrays himself as a regular guy plugging away at his job, as opposed to a “movie star” who should be aware that every eye is on him. With modesty, he similarly declares, “I’m not better than anybody else...I’m lucky.” This differentiates his attitude, not as arrogant, but grateful for his seeming good luck.



A second way Bale differentiates is when he explains his intensity during the tirade by distinguishing himself, the actor, from the character he was playing, John Connor. “I was trying to show a little of that in-the-blood craziness. I completely mixed up fact and fiction. I’m half John Connor; I’m half Christian there.” These statements indicate a him/me split. That was not me; this is me. As an actor, he was playing a role, and he neglected to step out of that role for his real life experience. Bale’s explanation becomes more plausible in light of the rant being spoken in his

American “John Connor” accent. This is especially interesting considering Goffman’s description of people behaving as actors in a performance. Goffman states, “one finds that the performer can be fully taken in by his own act.”³⁷ This seems especially applicable to an actor (person) acting in a fictional role, a “meta-actor” of sorts. Bale’s statement indicates he was so immersed in his secondary acting that he temporarily displaced acting in his own behalf, implying it was a complicated endeavor at best. Bale continues, “I don’t want to get someone fired. It’s hot air...I’m not a prima donna, sometimes I care too much.” These statements differentiate his intentions and feelings, and serve to explain and promote the idea that he has been misinterpreted and misunderstood.

Third, Bale differentiates his relationship with Hurlbut. “The idea of me being a bully is an insult to Shane...I couldn’t bully that guy if I tried...He’s much bigger than me.” These statements indicate there is a difference between the perception of the exchange with Hurlbut and the reality. The idea that Bale was threatening to Shane is, instead, insulting. Disregarding the obvious status differences



between movie DP and starring actor, Bale declares, “Shane is not little orphan Annie. He’s an ex-friggin-football player.”³⁸ This indicates, contrary to how it may have appeared, Bale never had the upper hand, and if Hurlbut had wanted, he could have easily squelched Bale.

Finally, Bale differentiates when he calls the radio station and he is, once again, “caught” on audiotape. The incident audio juxtaposed next to the account audio differentiates the tone of Bale’s voice. No longer ranting profanely at an undeserving victim, he demonstrates a friendly, casual conversation as with some old friends. Differentiation replaces the old, ugly voice that “he” used, with the new, nice voice that is really “me.”

In each of these ways, Bale creates splits between how things appeared and how they “really” were. These statements not only help to separate Bale from the offensive act, but also serve to help explain how the act came to be. Hence, through liberal bolstering and differentiation, as Ware and Linkugel’s postures of self-defense predicted, there is an explanative nature to Bale’s account.³⁹ He is not finished, yet, however. Bale continues to reduce offensiveness of the act by attacking his accusers.

Attacking His Accuser(s)

Benoit describes attacking the accusers as another tactic for reducing offensiveness. “If the rhetor reduces the credibility of the source of allegations, damage to the rhetor’s image may be limited.”⁴⁰

Bale, true to his friendly form, is subtle and vague when he attacks his accusers. By being such, he is even able to attack the disc jockeys to whom he is accounting without seeming to appear offensive. Bale explains, “So many people are giving opinions about this, but you know what? None of them were there...and for reasons that myself, and Shane the DP, and every crew member that was in that hangar at Kirtland Air force base that day, they know the reasons.” This statement clearly expresses the idea that his accusers are speaking without knowledge. It



indicates that the situation may have been misrepresented. Bale says, “Let me try to put this into a little bit of context. . . .” This statement implies that when scenes are out of context, they are more easily misconstrued. This invites the audience to consider that perhaps this incident was offered without enough context to make an appropriate judgment. When Bale attacks his accusers, his statements indicate people can twist the truth by presenting scenes out of context, implying things do not always speak for themselves.

In this subtle way, Bale attacks his accusers by accusing them of not having enough information to judge the situation fairly and misrepresenting his actions by presenting them out of context.



Minimization

For Bale’s final strategy to reduce offensiveness of the act, he employs one statement of direct minimization.

Benoit states that the goal of minimization is to “minimize the negative feelings associated with the wrongful act. If the audience agrees that the act is less offensive than it first appeared, the amount of damage to the rhetor’s reputation should be reduced.”⁴¹

As noted above, Bale says he and Hurlbut continued working together that same day. This speedy reconciliation minimizes the incident. Resuming an amicable working relationship so quickly after the incident indicates the blow up was not as consequential as it may have appeared. This may be because, as he indicated, they both understood the context of the incident. This one statement not only throws a positive light on both Hurlbut and Bale,

but also serves to minimize the incident.

Bale uses indirect minimization in an interesting message to Michael Phelps at the conclusion of his phone call. Because of the uniqueness of the message, I will discuss it separately, following Bale’s final category of image restoration, mortification.

Mortification



According to Benoit’s image restoration typology, besides the four ways Bale reduces offensiveness of the act: bolstering, differentiation, attacking his accusers and minimization, mortification is the only other category Bale employs. Benoit uses Burke’s definition of mortification: “To confess to committing the wrongful act and to beg for forgiveness.”⁴² Benoit readily points out, “If we believe the apology is sincere, we may choose to pardon the wrongful act.”⁴³ In addition, Benoit states, “those guilty of wrongdoing probably should accept the responsibility immediately and apologize. To do otherwise risks exacerbating the damage to one’s reputation.”⁴⁴ Not expressing mortification is an important reason Benoit and Hanczor did

not view Tonya Harding’s account favorably.⁴⁵

Importantly then, Bale expresses mortification. First he confesses his guilt saying, “I know I have a potty mouth; everybody knows that now.” With slow and deliberate language, he elaborates, “What I really want to stress is I have no confusion whatsoever—I was out of order beyond belief. I was way out of order. I acted like a punk. I regret that. . . I make no excuses for it. It is inexcusable.” At one point, the disc jockeys attempt to give Bale an “out,” possibly to attack his accusers or make an excuse by suggesting confidentiality on the set was breached. However, Bale responds, “I hear you completely, but it’s no excuse, because you know what? That confidentiality, that trust, [is for creative freedom and] is really not there for covering up bad behavior.” Even when given the opportunity to make an excuse, Bale refuses to do so, which seals his mortification. “I am embarrassed and I regret it.” These statements indicate he will not use an excuse even when it is offered because, as he said, “It is inexcusable.”

Bale’s mortification takes on a unique intensity when he says his act is “inexcusable.” Instead of minimizing the act by claiming, “people do it all the time,” Bale expresses his mortification by *maximizing* his actions to the point of being inexcusable, which implies unforgivable. In this way Bale indicates his behavior was so heinous that he cannot ask nor expect forgiveness. This



is an interesting tactic. Minimization is frequently used to try to make a molehill out of a mountain, so to speak. However, the strategy may backfire if the audience views the speaker as attempting to squirm out of his or her responsibility. By *maximizing* his act through mortification, expecting and asking for no mercy whatsoever, Bale’s audience is left to weigh and measure the act independently, and conclude that forgiveness is, indeed, a possibility; the same conclusion that minimization is designed to produce. The way Bale employs mortification goes beyond expressing guilt and owning his actions. By denying himself the opportunity of forgiveness, the audience is invited to give it to him anyway.

Finally, in an interesting use of indirect minimization, Bale ends his interview with a sidetrack from, or perhaps a conclusion to his account. Bale sends a seemingly

urgent message to Olympic gold medalist, Michael Phelps, who had recently been caught in an untoward act himself. The message implies minimization of Phelps' act, and by analogy, Bale's, too.

Message to Michael Phelps: Minimization by analogy

At the end of the phone call, when it appears Bale has said everything he called to say, he seems to suddenly switch gears:

CB: ...one extra thing—nothing to do with the movie—but I was listening to the radio earlier on. Please, Michael Phelps, swim in the next Olympics

DJs: Yeah

CB: This guy has a God-given talent

DJs: I think he will

CB: So he smoked a bit of weed. Plenty of our presidents have

DJs: Yeah

Right

Including the current one

CB: Everybody makes mistakes. Bounce back from it. You know, do not waste that godlike talent. Swim in the next Olympics, please

DJs: I'm sure he will

Very good

All right.



This message enables Bale to send a direct message exonerating Phelps, and provides an implicit comparison of his own circumstances. For example, Bale's statements indicate people with God-given talents should use them. Phelps has a God-given talent and so does Bale, evidenced by his successful career resume.⁴⁶ Bale minimizes Phelps smoking a "bit of weed" as an indulgence of even our highest political officials. This can be compared to Bale indulging in a profane rant, because "everybody has bad days." Phelps reported he used poor judgment smoking weed.⁴⁷ Similarly, Bale describes his rant as "my one-time lapse in judgment, my incredibly embarrassing meltdown."⁴⁸ Bale minimizes Phelps' poor judgment and indicates it should not keep Phelps from using his God-like talent because "everybody makes mistakes." Through minimization, Bale indicates that Phelps does not deserve to be in the doghouse, and by comparison, the audience is invited to conclude that Bale should not be in the doghouse, either. Neither Phelps nor Bale should 'stay put,' but "bounce back" and express their God-given talents. By boldly minimizing Phelps' behavior, this backdoor approach allowed Bale to modestly minimize his own behavior.



Bale's message to Michael Phelps provides Bale with an opportunity to indirectly extend his own minimization while not appearing to make any excuses for himself, only for Phelps. With Phelps as the focus, Bale is able to exonerate them both while encouraging the audience to root for continued demonstrations of their God-given talents.

Were Bale's Strategies Effective?

Analyzing the account of an actor offers a challenging scenario. While his statements were modest and he sounded convincing, I was always aware, *this is his job*. He is a professional who has extensive experience sounding sincere in whatever role he assumes. Fortunately, it is not the responsibility of the critic to discover truth, but to analyze discourse and suggest whether or not accounts are successful.

The only way to quantify whether or not Bale's apology was successful would be to poll the audience. To my knowledge, this has not been done. However, there is substantial textual feedback to which I can refer, including feedback from Bale's account in magazine articles, new Internet postings, and a follow-up from the original "interviewers," Kevin and Bean.

First, I'll go back to the beginning. At the conclusion of the phone call to Kevin and Bean, Bale invites them to "feel free to make fun of me at my expense." They respond, "Well, you've kind of taken the fun out of it now! We kind of see where you're coming from." Ralph, the showbiz reporter that had been imitating Bale's voice in the parodies, concluded the call saying, "You're a big man for owning up to your mistake and I hope that a lot of people listening will hear the perspective that you put it in and accept your apology and continue to support the great work that you do up there on the screen."⁴⁹ This statement may be considered priming the pump for the greater public audience. If Kevin and Bean accept Bale's account, perhaps the audience will follow suit. Second, Bale's phone call was picked up and heard on CNN's *Showbiz Tonight* and other stations worldwide.⁵⁰ By hearing what Kevin and Bean heard, an international audience may come to their same conclusion. Third, Kevin and Bean played the report from CNN the following morning and mocked the CNN reporter for over-dramatizing the original incident, sarcastically saying, "Don't let this guy apologize; he ought to be put to death!"⁵¹ This indicates a protective posturing towards Bale that a larger



audience may embrace. Fourth, at the end of April 2009, *Terminator Salvation* commercials started appearing on television, indicating that, despite the incident, the show will go on.

Four months later, in the June issue of *GQ* magazine, Andrew Corsello interviewed Bale. Corsello likely expressed the general reaction to Bale's account by saying, "In a way, your apology was as intense as the original tirade. You *nailed* that apology, man."⁵² Back to his cool, temperamental persona and lacking the open friendliness he exhibited with Kevin and Bean, Corsello describes Bale appearing at the interview covered in a hoodie and Ray Ban sunglasses, which he does not remove, approaching Corsello "in his low English accent [asking], 'We doing this here or what?'" Even the accent seems to lose its charm with this description. Despite these differences, however, when the unavoidable questions are encountered, Bale remains consistent with his account to Kevin and Bean. "Hey listen, I don't make any excuses. *None* of it is excusable."⁵³ He is also consistent differentiating between the role he was playing and himself. When asked, "Would you have unleashed the Rant as intensely, if at all, had you been playing someone other than John Connor?" Bale replied, "Of course not. And it wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been playing that scene, for C-----s sake, between John Connor and his wife, which is probably the most intense one in the movie ... I'd definitely say that that guy who was yelling was at least half John Connor, and the rest was Christian Bale."⁵⁴ Bale again defends Hurlbut as capable of defending himself, while continuing to ignore the obvious status differences that may have induced Hurlbut to absorb the verbal assault. "Hey, look, this was not a little kid. This was a full-grown man, much bigger than me. There was no bullying going on. He was capable of dealing with it. He did. We reconciled within half an hour."⁵⁵ Bale's consistent responses and the positive reaction from Corsello indicate, that like Hurlbut, we can all "deal with this," and reconcile relatively quickly.



In addition to these responses, for me, Bale's use of explicit, unyielding, even demanding use of mortification was his greatest strategic strength. His strategies for reducing offensiveness did help serve as a plausible explanation for the incident, but without unrelenting acceptance of his own responsibility, his explanation may have only sounded like an excuse, and as he consistently stressed, his behavior was inexcusable. Benoit says, "People do not like to admit that they were wrong," therefore, "when confession is coupled with remorse, it can gain the audience's good will."⁵⁶ Interestingly, Bale never uttered the words, "I'm sorry," but it seems clear through his verbal demeanor with Kevin and Bean, his explanation and his mortification, as Corsello stated, Bale "nailed" his apology. For all of these reasons, I evaluate Bale's account successful.



Considering the Impact

To discuss the implications of Bale's account, it may be helpful to compare his account with the accounts described in the literature review, those of Tonya Harding, Hugh Grant, and Queen Elizabeth. Each "celebrity" was accused of an offensive act. While each account is specific to the person and the incident, I will highlight two significant differences in Christian Bale's account not found in the prior three.

First, while Christian Bale importantly expressed mortification and accepted full responsibility for his actions, he also used four of six strategies to reduce offensiveness: bolstering, differentiation, attacking his accusers, and minimization. In contrast, according to Benoit, Harding, Grant and Queen Elizabeth also used reducing offensiveness most frequently, but with only two strategies. Grant and Harding used bolstering and attacking the accuser.^{57,58} Queen Elizabeth used bolstering and transcendence.⁵⁹ In addition to Bale's abundant use of bolstering and differentiation to provide a more plausible explanation for why the incident occurred, his overall use of more abundant strategies to reduce offensiveness may have strengthened his account. Bale's account



illustrates Benoit’s statement, “The use of multiple instances of a particular strategy may reflect...the rhetor’s desire to avoid relying on a single attempt to persuade the audience.”⁶⁰ This statement implies Bale desired to express a clear, consistent message.

In addition to using more strategies to reduce offensiveness than Harding, Grant, or Queen Elizabeth, Bale uses a tool unlike any of the others. Bale offers a surprise apology. The element of surprise, or spontaneity, carries several advantages. First, spontaneity is not only the expression of free will, but often, good will. When someone

does not appear obligated to account in a scheduled interview, but exerts effort to account voluntarily, it implies an anxious desire to express oneself and serves to add sincerity to their words.

Akin to a surprise attack or a surprise party, another advantage to a surprise apology is it catches others off-guard. This was made clear in the way the disc jockeys responded to Bale: “Are we being punked here?”⁶¹ When people are caught off guard they tend to be more vulnerable to suggestion due to the lack of time to raise their defenses and their skepticism. Because the hosts were caught off guard, Bale was able to spend his time on his own agenda, clearly an advantage. The disc jockeys had no time to consider in-depth questions, as evidenced in the transcript. Indeed, the disc jockeys merely responded to Bale’s statements, even helpfully offering brief prompts for his next statement, such as, “Really?” “OK,” and “Of course.” This gave Bale free reign to discuss only those issues he wanted to report. Anything that may have diverted his focus or created an awkward or difficult climate was diminished by the unguarded stance of the surprised “interviewers.” Bale effectively used Kevin and Bean’s morning show as an open forum to express his account, and he seemed like a nice guy doing it.

In contrast, the Queen’s address was unprecedented, but it was not speedy or spontaneous, allowing her audience time to raise their defenses and demonstrate their displeasure. Both Grant and Harding had scheduled interviews, and were asked prepared questions in which a successful answer is nearly impossible. For example, Chung asked Harding “[Have you] tried hard enough to express to Nancy Kerrigan how you feel about this incident?”⁶² How does anyone “try hard enough” to express sorrow and outrage over an incident without appearing guilty? These types of loaded questions are what Bale successfully avoided with his spontaneous account.

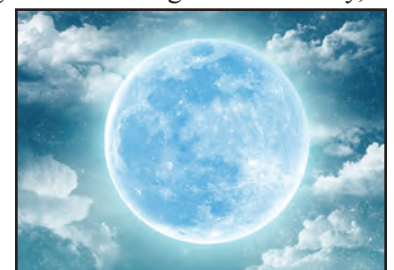
The subject of spontaneous public accounts is intriguing and suggests future study, however, finding another one may prove difficult. Contrary to Benoit’s statement in 1997 that politicians and corporate leaders account more often than entertainers, the new century has dawned with a plethora of celebrities accounting for their misdeeds. While there are no shortages of public apologies by celebrities, Bale seems to be unique in the style he exhibited. For example, David Letterman used his own talk show as a format to apologize for his marital infidelities. At first blush, this suggests spontaneity, but it seems likely the entire announcement was scripted, and by his own admission, he was responding to a threat of blackmail; hardly, then, a spontaneous gesture of good will. Kanye West apologized for his behavior towards Taylor Swift during her acceptance speech at the MTV Video Music Awards, but it was during a scheduled interview with Jay Leno, and West did not offer much of his own accord during the process. Finally, Tiger Woods accounted for untoward behavior in his personal life by appearing in an announced, scripted speech without an interviewer or follow-up questions. Nothing about it was spontaneous. All of these accounts would make interesting image restoration subjects for study, but Bale’s spontaneous “interview” may only come once in a blue moon.



Conclusion

At the end of 2009, Christian Bale was remembered. His rant was listed in *VHI’s Most Shocking Moments of 2009*, was featured on *Tinseltown’s Top Celebrity Turkeys of 2009*, and in February, 2010, Bale’s account was listed on *E! Online* as seventh on *The Top 9 Celebrity Apologies*.^{63, 64} It may well be that Bale’s rant outlives many of his other noteworthy achievements, but they may all intermingle as “entertainment.” Finally, since the exposure of this paper to a small audience, I have received suggestions that Bale’s rant and apology are somehow inconsequential, that perhaps it was not such a big deal anyway and that no great harm was done. One observer suggested that the infidelity and apology of Tiger Woods would be a more “legitimate” study.

I can answer those objections in two ways. First, in comparison to the untoward act of Tiger Woods’ long-term infidelity, I agree that Bale’s incident is less severe. However, this is what allows Bale to attempt a successful image restoration. If Woods said anything more than “I’m sorry,” berate himself, and beg for forgiveness, he would appear inappropriate and would open himself up for more criticism. Sometimes an actor cannot minimize or reduce the severity of his or her act. Conversely, Bale’s incident was reprehensible, but it still allowed him a wide variety of strategies to restore his image, and he used them. Second, I think the comments that suggest Bale’s incident seems



somehow insignificant now helps confirm the success of Bale's apology. When apologies are unspoken or inept, the untoward act continues to loom large, but in the after effects of a successful and accepted apology, the incident is naturally decreased in the minds of the hearers. I think it is this effect that has taken place. Before Bale's apology, pop culture pundits and prophets predicted Bale's public demise, saying the incident could ruin his career. After the apology, feedback is reduced to a wink and a nod, and what remains of the incident are parodies tucked onto the dusty shelves of YouTube. *Terminator [or] Salvation*—the movie title nearly asks for a jury sentence on Bale himself, but it appears we took our cue from Bruna Nessif of *E! Online*, who said, "He made it hard not to forgive him. So we did."⁶⁵



Transcript: Kevin and Bean morning show

Ralph's Movie Beat

Ralph: I have been complaining to you, Kevin and Bean, about how you've been treating the whole Christian Bale story. I do not think it's funny what you've been doing to Christian Bale.

DJ: No, I don't know that at all.

Ralph: I don't like the way you've been mocking him

DJ: You didn't protest that at all.

Ralph: I find it offensive, personally, and that voice that Bean does, where he pretends to be Christian Bale and goes off on that rant we've heard—and I would like to take this opportunity to personally apologize to Mr. Christian Bale. We've got him on the phone – Mr. Bale –

CB: Hello there guys.

Ralph: Hello, Christian, how are you?

Gasps by other DJs

CB: How you doin' fellas?

Oh no!

Ralph: Doing well, sir, I...

CB: To whom am I talking to?

Oh no!

Ralph: This is Ralph, Kevin and Bean, and Lisa May's also here in the studio with us, Christian.

CB: Oh all right, well, listen, I spoke to you guys a few years back. You seem like good guys and I wanted to talk with you about it.

DJs: Oh no!

Are we being punked here?

No you're not. This is really Christian Bale.

Please tell us it's not!

CB: Believe me, this is no punk.

Wow

Ralph: Christian has apparently heard some of the segments we've been doing since the release of that audiotape

CB: And I gotta tell ya, I have to tell ya, listen, it has been a miserable week for me

Ralph: Sure

CB: ...and you guys—I was driving in the car—at least I think it was you guys I was listening to

Ralph: Right

CB: and you made me laugh in the midst of all this, uh, craziness

DJ: I find that hard to believe. Really?

Ralph: Really?

CB: So, listen, I know I have a potty mouth; everybody knows that now

DJ: Right

CB: but I understand this is live, so please, don't worry, I will behave

DJs: Oh, ok

Well, we appreciate that

If you don't, we are done professionally, Christian!

Laughter

CB: Now listen, can you let me make a few comments?

DJs: Yes

Sure

We'd love to give you the opportunity –thank you for calling

CB: The thing that I really want to stress is I have no confusion whatsoever—I was out of order beyond belief. I was way out of order. I acted like a punk. I regret that and there is nobody that has heard that tape that is hit harder by it than me.

DJ: Oh

CB: I make no excuses for it. It is inexcusable and I hope that that is absolutely clear. You know, and uh, one thing that has really disturbed me throughout this, um, because I'm just, I'm not familiar, I'm not comfortable yet with this notion of being a "movie star." I've always—I'm an actor, and I don't quite know how to handle the movie star thing. And the thing that disturbs me so much is that I've heard a lot of people say that I seem to think I'm better than anybody else and nothing could be farther from the truth. I'm a lucky—I don't want to swear—I'm a lucky

DJ: Laughter – SOB, right?

CB: lucky at what I do. I never forget that and that is why I put so much into what I do and why I care so much about it and why sometimes that enthusiasm just goes awry. You know, and please, if anybody ever sees that I really am thinking that I really am better than anybody else, stick a fork in my...

DJ: butt

CB: ...backside. Turn me over. I will be done. That is not me, you know?

Ralph: I gotta tell you, we were giving you points for, um, the length of the conversation, because I would have run out of energy in about thirty seconds

CB: Absolutely. Listen, and let me tell you how I had that much energy for that day

DJ: Ok

CB: Let me try to put this into a little bit of context, because there seem to be so many people who are giving opinions about this, but you know what? None of them were there.

DJs: Right

Yeah

CB: Now, so we're making Terminator. I'm assuming you're familiar with the mythology?

DJs: Of course

Of course

CB: You've seen T2?

DJ: Yes

CB: It is a great movie, and in it you will meet Sarah Connor

DJ: um hmm

CB: and she is in an insane asylum. Why is she there? Because she is crazy

Laughter

CB: Now I play John Connor, her son, and on the day all of this happened, the scene that we were doing, I was trying to show a little of that in-the-blood craziness

DJ: um hmm

CB: and you know what? It went very wrong. And for reasons that myself and Shane, the DP and every crew member that was in that hangar at Kirtland Air Force Base that day, they know the reasons, I got annoyed and then what happened—I made it ugly, and that was awful of me. I took it out way too far. I completely mixed up fact and fiction. I'm half John Connor. I'm half Christian there, and—we've all heard

DJ: yeah

CB: ...exactly what...

DJ: You know, Christian, the think I felt bad about when I heard this, regardless of your personal behavior was that, I think that on a set or any sort of creative enterprise, there should be a certain amount of freedom to screw up and do what you do without having to face it being made public and then having to deal with it in the press. That must be awfully difficult.

CB: I hear you completely, but it's no excuse, because you know what? That confidentiality, that trust, is really not there for covering up bad behavior.

DJ: Right

CB: That is there—and it is essential—that is here though, so that creatively you can experiment and you can try things that maybe are abysmal—that maybe are embarrassing beyond belief, and you know and there's a trust with the director and the producers that nobody will ever see that. It will be destroyed if it didn't work. But you have to try those things.

DJ: How long ago did this actually happen? And how long...

CB: This was back in July of last year

DJ: July of last year. And how long was it before—you've talked to the DP now? You've...

CB: Oh listen, listen, I've not only talked with him, we have resolved this completely, that very day.

DJ: Oh wow

CB: We kept working for a number of hours. Listen, when I'm saying I'm not coming back to that set if he's still hired, you know what? It's hot air

Chuckle

CB: I don't believe that

DJ: Right

CB: I have no intention of getting anybody fired. I absolutely believe in Shane's capability. He's done a wonderful job on that movie. We not only kept working that day, we worked together for at least a month after that—every single day. We saw each other two weeks back and we worked together then. Everything is resolved between us. There is no problem whatsoever.

DJ: Is it weird...?

CB: ...and he's done a great job on it. And I really want through this, in case anyone has considered he's not doing a great job. I want everyone to know, I've seen a rough cut of the movie. It looks fantastic and he has done a wonderful, professional job. I don't want anyone to have a misunderstanding about that.

Ralph: I am really looking forward to this movie. It does look fantastic.

CB: And I appreciate that because so many people, not just me, not just Shane, so many crew members have worked so hard on this movie. And, and a really important point that I want to make is that, hey, I know a number of people are going to be thinking that they don't want to go see the movie because they think I'm some kind of prima donna or something

DJ: Right

CB: It ain't that, it's just maybe sometimes I care too much about the movie. But you, you, it wasn't just me, it was Shane, the DP, the director, the other actors, every single crew member—everybody—worked so hard on this movie, and please, I'm asking people, please do not allow my one-time lapse in judgment, my incredibly embarrassing meltdown to overshadow this movie and to have all of those peoples hard work go to waste. It's just too great a mythology for that to happen.

Jumble

CB: And one other thing is...

DJ: Go ahead

CB: A lot of people have said I'm being a bully to this guy. It's an insult to Shane.

Chuckle

CB: I couldn't bully that guy if I tried. He is a big guy. He is much bigger than me. He's an ex-friggin-football player

Chuckles

CB: You know? I am—this is not Little Orphan Annie

DJ: Yeah

CB: ...I was going off on, ok? And the other point is a lot of people have been talking nonsense about is that it almost came close to being physical. Well, it NEVER came close to being physical whatsoever. So, please, I just want to make completely clear I am embarrassed by it, and I regret it, and I ask everybody to sit down and ask themselves: have they ever had a bad day?

DJs: Yeah

Um hmm

CB: And have they ever lost their temper and really regretted it immensely?

DJ: Yeah, we have a special appreciation for mistakes that we make and then they come back to haunt us on tape and get played over and over again, and that sucks. And we were saying at the time, I'm sure you heard me say this, Christian Bale, that, uh, it's a good thing all of us don't have our worst moments taped and, you know, put out there for everyone to hear. Because that would be embarrassing for us

Ralph: I yell at Kevin and Bean like you did every day

DJs: yep, Christian, that's what it is

That's right

That happens

CB: Right, it's just that nobody else hears it

DJs: Right
Exactly

CB: Ok, guys, listen, thank you so much for taking the time

DJ: Yes

CB: I also appreciate you making fun of it, you know, I had it coming. Feel free to make fun of me at my expense.

DJ: Well, you've kind of taken the fun out of it now! We kind of see where you're coming from

CB: I, I, I, (trying to break in) I deserve it completely

Ralph: I was always telling Kevin and Bean it was a bad idea, that I really was against it, but they insisted
Laughter

DJ: We told Ralph he shouldn't have made fun of you

CB: Thanks very much for listening to me, and listen, one extra thing—nothing to do with the movie—but I was listening to the radio earlier on. Please, Michael Phelps, swim in the next Olympics

DJ: Yeah

CB: This guy has a God-given talent

DJ: I think he will

CB: So he smoked a bit of weed. Plenty of our presidents have

DJs: Yeah
Right
Including the current one

CB: Everybody makes mistakes. Bounce back from it. You know, do not waste that godlike talent. Swim in the next Olympics, please.

DJs: I'm sure he will
Very good
Alright

Ralph: You're a big man for owning up to your mistake and I hope that a lot of people listening will hear the perspective that you put it in and accept your apology and continue to support the great work that you do up there on the screen, Christian Bale. Thanks for calling in today. We enjoyed talking to you.

CB: Thank you very much, man

Ralph: Thank you very much. See ya. Bye.

Addendum

Just prior to publication, Christian Bale won both a Golden Globe and an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in “The Fighter.” Both of his acceptance speeches were modest and memorably gracious. In a humorous reference to his past use of the “F” expletive, he evoked mild laughter from the audience. I think it is safe to say Bale bounced back.

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