Celebrity

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Introduction

What is celebrity? There is little consensus in either academia or popular culture over its significance, depth, vacuity, meaning, history and fluctuating fortunes, but there is a sizeable amount of debate. In media, film and cultural studies a range of approaches has been adopted, from screen studies to political economy, from ideological critique to audience research. Celebrity has therefore been variously understood as an inevitable part of some kind of universal 'human condition', as psychoanalytic mystery to be unwrapped, structural by-product of the PR industry, vestige of Romantic individualism and commodity fetish *par excellence*. Let us dip an analytical toe in its spangled waters.

The word 'celebrity' tends to get elided with two others – 'stars' and 'fame' – with which it has become, to some extent, synonymous. There are interesting genealogical differences in meaning between this triad. Celebrity was, in its earliest usage, linked to 'fame'; but it was also linked to the word 'thronged', a derivation indicating something of the activity *around* the celebrity, gesturing towards, for instance, the acts of talking about and congregating around them; a vibrant, social quality that is also connected to celebrity's predecessor as a noun, 'celebration'. As Robert van Kreiken puts it, linking the emergence of the word celebrity with a moment when individuals were increasingly struggling for power in a court society and an expanding mercantile culture, 'one could be quietly and respectably famous, whereas to have 'celebrity' had different quality, a certain buzz in everyday social life' (van Kreiken 2011: 15). This also indicates -- as several decades of work on fan cultures has been at pains to point out -- how the celebrity would be nothing without its audience, or its fans, to construct it and prop it up. (Hills 2002; Lewis 1992; Sandvoss et al 2007)

Historians of celebrity have sought to stamp different periodisations on celebrity culture. Leo Braudy's groundbreaking book *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History* (1986) devoted over 600 lively pages to cultures of fame in the west, from Alexander the Great onwards. 'The history of fame' wrote Braudy 'is the history of the changing ways by which individuals have sought to bring themselves to the attention of others and, not incidentally, have thereby gained power over them' (Barudy 1986: 3). Braudy's definition also indicates something of how tenaciously celebrity has been linked to the notion of an *individual* (indeed, a question just as likely to be asked is 'what is *a* celebrity'?). When the term 'celebrity' (rather than 'fame') came into being in the English language in the sixteenth century, and started to gain pace as common currency in the seventeenth, this was also at the earliest moments of what the political theorist C.B. Macpherson famously termed 'the rise of

possessive individualism', as the idea of the self as, above all, a profoundly 'bounded' entity, a personal property (Macpherson 2010, van Krieken 2012: 15).

The Frenzy of Renown has occasionally been taken to task -- as is the lot of influential texts -- for presenting celebrity, despite the remit of the book, as a fairly transhistorical phenomenon (Morgan 2011). A more generous reading might note that whilst there is slippage between the terms, Braudy's book leans more toward a study of fame, rather than 'celebrity' (as its title indicates). But the critique does highlight something of the disagreements between historians of celebrity. Whilst Robert van Krieken provides a persuasive account of the word's sixteenth-century emergence, Fred Inglis, in his book *A Short History of Celebrity* (2010) argues that celebrity culture begins in the eighteenth century and solidifies in the nineteenth, when 'celebrity comes into being as a portioning out of the posture and position of power', a 'portioning-out' institutionalised through consumer culture, the fashion-system and new media formations (Inglis 2010: 9). The development of the new forms of visual culture of photography and film, and their industrialisation, were to consolidate this rise of celebrity in the twentieth century.

Whilst Inglis's book presents a later view of celebrity than that of Braudy or van Krieken's, it is nonetheless similarly trying to act as a rejoinder to those with no apparent historical consciousness who think that celebrity was invented yesterday, or demarcate it as solely a twentieth century, mass-produced phenomenon. In other words: historians of celebrity like to accuse each other of erroneous periodisations; and there are different historical and geographical cultures of celebrity. As Simon Morgan says, 'it would be naïve to expect celebrity cultures to be identical in form in widely differing times and places' (Morgan 2011: 109).

I would argue that out of these struggles for definitionary power by these white male Western historians of celebrity we might make three main points. First: that celebrity cannot be understood as a transhistorical phenomenon, but that elements of what it came to involve – in particular, competing for attention -- have an extremely long history. Second: that the evolution of the term 'celebrity' needs to be understood as a particular geneaology which in the West owes a great deal to the emergence of modernity, bourgeois capitalism and possessive individualism. And third: that since then, and aside from then, there have been a number of distinct discursive formations or 'waves' of celebrity culture, all with their own particular characteristics.

'Known for his well-knowness': gendering false images

If some of these earlier 'waves' of celebrity culture might be distinguished by their relationships to expanding mercantile cultures and the challenges to religion in courtly society, or to the advent of mass production in the nineteenth century, a later significant celebrity phase was that intersecting with Fordism in the twentieth-century, together with its cultural correlates including the industrialisation of film and the rise of PR as an industry. Out of this epoch emerged Daniel Boorstin's telling, widely-quoted and entertainingly (or maddeningly) tautological description of a celebrity as 'a person well-known for his well-knownness' (1961: 57). Boorstin's definition appeared in his book *The Image* (one of a range of interesting popular sociological texts he published) alongside another, somewhat less quoted maxim: 'the

sign of a celebrity is often that his name is worth more than his services' (220). These are interesting descriptions (not least in that they unconsciously denote celebrity as male) as they both gestured towards and helped codify what are by now well-trodden themes of celebrity: that celebrity is, in Boorstin's other term, a 'pseudo-event', a phenomenon which is not based around talent, which is not organic and 'real', but 'manufactured'; one which is dependent on the puffery of the PR industry.

It is worth disaggregating these themes a little as they are important. Celebrity as 'pseudo-event', for example, became popularised in critical theory by followers of Jean Baudrillard, and celebrity associated with a vacuous desert of the hyperreal. The strength of this position is that it highlights the strategies of exploitation and the untruths used by capitalist consumer culture and the PR industry in order to sell products for profit. The weakness of this position is that by figuring celebrity culture as false and unreal it obscures the very processes through which it is able to gain traction: including the psychological investments of fans and audiences, the corporate scaffolding of the PR industry, the discourse of profit and economic growth and the labour of cultural intermediaries. This means that celebrity culture becomes effectively situated in a hermetically-sealed theoretical bubble from which it is very hard to see either how it does change, or indeed how it might ever change or be challenged.

The question of how celebrity buzz was created, packaged and sold through the entertainment industry, and how this was connected to the exploitations of a new stage in capitalist political economy, was also one that concerned some of the earliest twentieth-century writers on celebrity. It particularly concerned writers associated with the Frankfurt school, including Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and Leo Lowenthal. In his essay 'The Triumph of Mass Idols' Lowenthal charted the rise of entertainment celebrity since the beginning of the century through a content analysis of prominent figures in magazines and newspapers, and concluded that a shift had taken place from 'idols of production' to 'idols of consumption' (Lowenthal 1944/1984). The piece is not only saturated with anxiety towards feminized mass consumption, and valorizes 'serious' middle-class culture against 'base' lower class culture, but it also -- somewhat perversely for a Marxist text -- normalizes the category of business celebrity as somehow respectable (Littler 2006).

Lowenthal's anxiety towards the gendered dimension of the new idols of consumption betrayed a more widespread anxiety by intellectuals towards the position and power of women (Huyssen 1986). This was of course not completely new, nor has it died away. Popular culture continues to be disparaged as insignificant whilst simultaneously feminized on a regular basis (Holmes and Negra 2011). There are also longer formative associations between celebrity and women; as Mary Louise-Roberts points out, the word 'star' was first used in the context of fame in 1824, in England, to refer to an actress who could sell out a show in a theatre through her name alone (Roberts 2010: 108; van Krieken 2012: 47). There is also a lengthy related history of printed materials dealing in gossip around female actresses from seventeenth century-Restoration drama onwards, indicating an eroticised excitement at a new prominence for women in this part of the public sphere alongside a desire to sell papers (Nussbaum 2005: 150; van Krieken 2012 35).

The conflation between femininity, mass/popular culture and celebrity can itself be understood as cashing in on, reflecting and creating gendered interests and pursuits, and has therefore been interpreted with various emphases on these different aspects. In the 1980s and 1990s an influential body of work in film studies, often coalescing around the journal *Screen*, sought to understand the way cinema and its apparatus worked in connection with what we might term the 'psychological apparatus' of its viewers. Part of the achievement of feminist film theory at this time was to foreground the sheer complexity of how and why people related to and 'identified with' cinematic celebrities. Jackie Stacey's work on 'feminine fascinations', for instance, yoked together audience studies and psychoanalytic theory to explore the range of roles women adopted when watching and talking about film stars (devotion, adoration, aspiration, imitation) and to emphasise how these worked to mix up conventional distinctions between identification and desire (Stacey 1994). Such lines of enquiry had a connection with work on the relationship between fans, gender and identity – for example, work on how the 'bedroom cultures' of teenage girls involved arranging various possessions including celebrity posters as a means of testing out identities, or work in fandom studies on how female audience screaming at concerts might be a means for young women to deal with the contradictions of sexual and gender identity (McRobbie 1991, Lewis 1992).

Constructed celebrity and the question of *really*

The question of the gender dynamic between celebrity and audience was taken up in Richard Dyer's highly influential work. This work brought together screen studies and queer studies, and linked this to an analysis of ideology that typified much of the cultural studies work coming out of the UK in the late 70s and 80s. Dyer's first book on celebrity, *Stars,* explored the characteristics of stardom, noting, for instance, the recurrent fourfold motifs of ordinariness, extraordinariness, luck and hard work in most celebrity construction. Using material from Hollywood's 'classic period' of the 1920s to 1940s, he produced an analysis of social type of the star and its sub-categories (the tough guy, the good Joe, the pin-up) and of key motifs surrounding stardom; including how love was a core theme of Hollywood fan magazines at this time -- with its sense of 'a world in which material problems have been settled and all that is left is relationships' (Dyer 1980: 45) – but in which only certain kinds of love (hetereosexual emotional/erotic) were foregrounded; 'not relationships of, for example, work, friendship, political comradeship or, surprisingly enough, parents and children' (Dyer 1980: 45).

Dyer's work foregrounded how celebrity was constructed on multiple levels, involving both an official version of celebrity (e.g. actors on film) then a highly orchestrated expose of 'the real' celebrity behind the public mask, an expose of 'what they're really like' (e.g. through media coverage of and interviews with the stars). The activity of secondary media becomes crucial to the active construction of the personae of the 'private self': this is a key mechanism providing 'intimate access' to the star.

The mechanisms these media realms deployed and through which celebrity is constructed was to become an area taken up by a branch of cultural sociology interested in analysing media production. Marshall, Bonner and Turner's co-authored work *Fame Games: The Construction of Celebrity in Australia* (2000) interviewed a

variety of people working in the promotions industries to help them analyse how celebrity was being constructed in and around the Australian media. Jessica Evans and David Hesmondhalgh's co-edited book, *Understanding Media: Inside Celebrity* connected together three perspectives on celebrity, linking together a study of celebrity's media production with an analysis of it as a text, and from the vantage point of audience studies.

Dyer's later work *Heavenly Bodies* continued his analysis of the 'social types' stars offered, this time by providing an in-depth analysis of the offered by the personae of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland. Its analysis of the constraints of heteronormative femininity, the changing face of racist cinematic stock types and the appeal of the 'tragic' celebrity for queer audiences combined a very contextually-oriented social analysis of the changing acceptable models of personhood at a particular moment with a nuanced sense of the malleable uses of the star for its various audiences (Dyer 2003).

However, studies of celebrity in the 1980s still remained overwhelmingly oriented towards cinema and stardom, as indicated by the dominance of the term 'star studies'. In the 1990s, the dominance of this term was to shift, along with the texture of celebrity culture itself.

The rebirth of celebrity
As the end of the twentieth century rolled into view new outlets were created for celebrity culture. Media deregulation, digital technology and the commercial aspirations of magazine publishers all helped facilitate a boom in the expansion of celebrity magazines where markedly less respectful star coverage was the norm, alongside celebrity-oriented television programming, especially around reality TV (Holmes and Jermyn 2004). The formats of programmes such as *I'm A Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here!* and *Celebrity Big Brother* were to have a considerable global reach. *I'm A Celebrity!,* for instance, which was created in the UK, was franchised in France, Germany, Hungary, India, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. The Dutch-born *Celebrity Big Brother* spawned franchises worldwide including in Indonesia, Serbia, Montenegra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, UK, India, Bulgaria, Croatia, Israel, Portugal and the Phillipines.

A key feature of these mutated celebrity media forms were their somewhat inventive use of the celebrity fashion cycle. 'Z-list' or at least D-list celebrities – those forgotten about, or whose media stock was deemed to be waning, were enthusiastically targeted and signed up by the aforementioned reality shows, and given a new lease of celebrity life. What might be thought of as 'celebrity kitsch' was incorporated with zeal into reality programming. For Chris Rojek, such brief celebrity could be imagined as part of a typology. Rojek christened 'celetoids' those 'lottery winners, one-hit wonders. Stalkers, whistle-blowers, sports' arena streakers, have-a-go heroes, mistresses of public figures and the various other social types who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next' (Rojek 2001: 20-1). A sub-category of the celetoid, for Rojek, is a 'celeactor', which is a fictional variant of the momentarily ubiquitous celetoid (like Borat) (Rojek 2001). Rojek's lexicon of celebrity joined earlier variants such as James Monaco's triparte celebrity structure of (in order of longeivity and prestige) the hero, the celebrity and the 'quasar' (Monaco 1978).

'Celebrity studies' boomed, to some extent, in academia by the 2000s alongside this wave of celebrity in popular culture. Publications like P. David Marshall's *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, Su Holmes and Sean Redmond's *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* and the journal *Celebrity Studies* worked to attempt to map and extend this new field. 'Celebrity studies' had, therefore, expanded both in order to try to deal with the proliferation of these new formations of celebrity and to push it beyond the narrow vacuum of film studies in which it had previously become entrenched. Beyond the horror of those predominantly UK-based conservative media journalists who expressed outrage that celebrity should be seriously thought about in academia, (and who still apparently didn't realise either cultural studies or the 1960s had happened at all) the emergent or expanding interest in celebrity as an area did leave open a troubling question. Was it at risk, despite its multidisciplinary and critical approaches, of fetishising and celebrifying a celebrity culture it sought to analyse?

This question raises a related and wider issue: the question of the relationships between the new formations celebrity culture was taking and the political landscape of neoliberalism. The individualisation, personalisation and celebritisation of the political process of representative democracy in the West came under useful scrutiny in works such as John Corner and Dick Pels' interesting collection *Media and the Restyling of Politics* (2003), Kristina Riegert's edited volume *Politicotainment* (2007) on how television and celebrity negotiate politics, John Street and P. David Marshall's work on celebrity politicians (Street 2012, Marshall 1997) and Mark Wheeler's book on the celebritisation of Obama and beyond (Wheeler 2014).

Some of the most telling work on celebrity and neoliberal politics has been in the area where celebrity intersects with the voluntary sector and charitable/'humanitarian' work. As I have discussed elsewhere, the expansion of celebrities connection to charity has a number of causes: the 'professionalization' of charities and NGOs; the fact that it is often a cheap way for celebrities to get free or cheap publicity; and the marketization of areas of public or 'common' expenditure (Littler 2008; 2014). For instance, Dan Brockington's book *Celebrity and the Environment* was driven not by an interest in celebrity personae – he entertainingly admits in the introduction that his main problem in writing the book was that to begin with he simply did not know the names of the people involved – but by the fact that their presence in his area of study, wildlife conservation, was becoming unavoidable and increasingly powerful. (Brockington 2009, 2014). For Ilan Kapoor, treading a staunchly Zizekian path, 'celebrity humanitarianism' is fundamentally depoliticising and aggrevates the very global inequality it seeks to redress (Kapoor 2013). Whilst professional celebrity involvement in the humanitarian sector has a lengthy history, including UNICEF's collaboration with the American actor Danny Kaye in 1953, for example, its expansion since the 1980s through the invention of the UN Goodwill Ambassadors and philanthrocapitalism more widely has been dramatic (Littler 2014; Wheeler 2011, Wilson 2011). For Lillie Chouliaraki this is marked by a shift in celebrity presentation from other-directed humanitarian compassion to self-directed post-humanitarian narcissism, meaning that celebrities today tend to talk about their own personal growth through charity work (Chouliaraki 2012).

New directions

The connections between celebrity and environmental issues is a related area and this domain of 'spectacular environmentalisms' is shot through with similarly graphic paradoxes, hyperbole and hypocrisies (Goodman and Littler 2013; Boykoff, Brockington, Goodman and Littler 2015). In *Greening the Media* (2012) Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller point out that whilst many Hollywood stars are eager to be 'eco-celebs', 'the motion picture industry is the biggest producer of conventional pollutants of all industries located in the Los Angeles area' and that the disposable orientation of film and TV production and consumption is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions more generally (Maxwell and Miller 2012: 67-9). Nonetheless, as Miller also points out, we ignore at our peril the 'tiny, superstructural roles that stars can play, so powerful are their names in orienting discourse' (Miller 2013: 373)

There has been some interest in analysing 'icons' (Latour and Weibel 2002; Ghosh 2011) that are deemed as distinct from celebrities inasmuch as they 'acquire value over time' (Ghosh 2011: 177). It could be remarked here that icons are part of a continuum in the same way that the celetoid is related to the celebrity. In these respects, Bishnupria Ghosh's work is interesting as it works to theorise the material and symbol intersections of icons with specific and changing political landscapes, and finds more progressive possibilities in iconicity. She writes of how Indian 'Bandit Queen' Phoolan Devi became a commodity image, but also much more: 'The woman with arms upraised had become the mediator of a structure of feeling for an emergent collective – possible but yet to come' (Ghosh 2011: 3).

Another inevitably developing area of study is the use of social media by celebrities. The idea of a having more direct access to the celebrity through their Twitter feed for example has ignited the excitement of both fans and publicists. (At the time of writing, US singer Katy Perry is celebrity queen of Twitter in terms of number of follower numbers – over 50 million -- closely followed by US singer Justin Bieber and US President Barack Obama). In one way the apparent popularity of certain celebrities on Twitter manifests another twist on Dyer's emphasis on how celebrity culture manufacture a reveal of the mystery of what celebrities are 'really' like; in another, it marks a significant shift in the way celebrities communicate and mediate their interaction with their audience, in terms of how it functions to apparently disclose trivia in real time, using what appear to be the 'direct' words of the star (Crawford 2009, Bennett 2012, Marshall 2006).

Twitter appears in these particular ways to be dominated by US- celebrities; and in another sense, it indicates some of the transnational connections and new global configurations made possible by social media. The question of how celebrity translates, or not, across national boundaries remains a persistently interesting area of celebrity study. Arvind Rajagopal's work on Mother Theresa, for instance, demonstrates how she never achieved anything like the levels of celebrity in India that she did in Europe and the US: he argues that she mainly functioned as a neo-colonial figure of compassion and caring for the West, an exported model of individualised solutions to social problems, a figure through which India could be patronised and imperial dynamics negated (Rajagopal 1999: 126-141). Paul Gilroy's groundbreaking work on Bob Marley demonstrated how it is possible for celebrity to gain its power through an entrenchment in disaporic identity rather than via one singular national

culture. Gilroy argues that Marley's celebrity became 'planetary' in nature, relating through hybridised diasporic cultures, part of the 'more difficult cosmopolitan commitment' that is connected to the anti-imperialist struggle while eschewing essentialism (Gilroy 2000: 130-131).

There are, then, a wide range of existing approaches to celebrity. And others are in process: take for example the interesting ethnographic research project and social media project 'CelebYouth', a collaborative, UK-based investigation into 'the role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations'.[1] However, possibly the approach receiving least attention is that voiced in the introduction to Dan Brockington's book *Celebrity and the Environment*:

> There are millions of us who are not interested in celebrities. In fact, we are in the majority. Over 98 per cent of the population of Britain does not buy *Hello!*; over 80 per cent does not even read any celebrity magazine. (Brockington 2009: iix-ix)

Alongside the relationship between celebrity and those radically anti-individualist political movements which work to hide personalised identity – from the scarf coverings of Zapatistas through Occupy's Guy Fawkes masks to the balaclavas of Pussy Riot and beyond – it could, perhaps, be argued that we should try to fit this type of everyday, less self-consciously political, radical lack of interest in celebrity more firmly into the frame of celebrity analysis.

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[1] http://www.celebyouth.org/about/. Accessed 1st March 2014

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