



City Research Online

City, University of London Institutional Repository

Citation: Goodman, M. K. & Littler, J. (2013). Celebrity Ecologies: Introduction. *Celebrity Studies*, 4(3), pp. 269-275. doi: 10.1080/19392397.2013.831623

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/5970/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2013.831623>

Copyright: City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

Reuse: Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Environment, Politics and Development Working Paper Series

Department of Geography, King's College London

Year 2013

Paper # 56

Introduction
Celebrity Ecologies

Mike Goodman (Kings College London) and Jo Littler (City University London)

Department of Geography, King's College London

©2013 by the Author(s)

This paper is posted at King's College London, Department of Geography at
<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/departments/geography/research/epd/workingpapers.aspx>

Introduction

Celebrity Ecologies

Mike Goodman (Kings College London) and Jo Littler (City University London)

Out of the efforts of environmental NGOs to raise their profiles amidst frenetic global mediascapes, the construction of celebrity in a dispersed post-Fordist promotional landscape, the continual mainstreaming of ecological concerns, the commodification of anxiety, and the celebritisation of politics, a particular breed of charismatic megafauna has emerged, blinking, into the daylight: the ‘environment-saving’ star. Whether as the face, voice or embodiment of concerns about climate change, clean water, deforestation and over-fishing, it can sometimes seem that every celebrity from global megastars to Z-listers is in the business of getting us to think, care and do differently in order to ‘save the planet’. Dedicated websites exist to catalogue and share the environmental, charity and humanitarian efforts of celebrities of all stripes. Look to the Stars.com reveals that Greenpeace is supported by 58 different celebrities, and tells us what other causes they are associated with or support (looktothestars.com 2013). Ecorazzi.com, which details green celebrity lifestyles, provides an insight into the clothing choices of actress Helen Hunt, who wore a ‘simple navy blue strapless ecofriendly gown designed by H&M’ and the textile recycling NGO Global Green, on the red carpet at the 2013 Oscars. As Ecorazzi states, ‘there’s nothing like taking a risk on one of the biggest red carpets of the year and doing it in an eco-friendly way’ -- because according to Hunt, the combination of celebrity and environmentalism is ‘win, win, win!’ (Koerner 2013).

But is the marriage between celebrity and environmental issues always ‘win, win, win’? Popular scepticism and some of the research in this issue indicate not. Perhaps we should ask instead: is celebrity – with its individualized mode of power, its concentration of wealth, its imbrication in systemic profit-making - the exact *opposite* of what biodiversity and the environmental crisis needs: participation, co-operation, regulation against exploitation, and systemic political change? There are many persuasive factors which could be mobilised to support this strand of argument. Celebrity tends most often to

appear as part of late capitalist consumer culture, tied to the ideology of ‘economic growth’, to be deployed as a resource to sell more and more stuff, with the lives of its D and Z list ‘celetoids’ (Rojek 2001) both proliferating and becoming more fleeting, just like the products built around planned obsolescence that they are sometimes paid to promote (Turner 2009).

This issue approaches the relationship between celebrity and the environment from a number of different disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in order to ask how the shifting nature of celebrity and the shifting ‘nature of nature’ have both collided and mutually constituted each other. Bringing together a wide range of articles on the subject, it connects issues including the historical evolution of the animal-as-star, the debatable influence of celebrities on environmentalism, the politics of celebrity within climate change activism and the environmental cost of celebrity itself.¹

What does it mean to speak of ‘celebrity ecologies?’ We use the term here in two ways: to think about the imbrication between celebrity culture and ‘nature’, and to think about the forms or ‘ecologies’ such relationships take. The term ‘ecologies’ has, of recent years, had a renaissance in certain sections of cultural and media theory; as indicated by the title of Matthew Fuller’s book *Media Ecologies* (2007) for example, or Jussi Parikka’s work (2010, 2011), which thinks about media formations through the ‘insect logic’ of buzzes, swarms and networks. These works relate to longer traditions of using ‘ecologies’ to think about media, particularly Marshall McLuhan’s writings on media as ‘environments of perception’, an area of research on how media forms create social transformations and effect human values which itself became codified by Neil Postman as a field of study called ‘media ecology’. The more contemporary variant of media ecology – or media ecology 2.0 – is, like so much current theoretical work, self-consciously less human-centred in its approach, being informed by theorists such as Simondon, Whitehead and Guattari in theorising assemblages of non-/post-/human interaction; considering, for example, how a machine ‘carries with itself the dynamics of

¹ This issue derives to a great extent from the AHRC-funded ‘Spectacular Environmentalisms’ research network (2010-12; AH/H039279/1) and we are therefore grateful to all participants and to the AHRC’s Researching Environmental Network scheme. We did also ask a female commentator to contribute to this issue, but she was unfortunately taken ill and unable to contribute her commentary.

thought' (Simondon in Parriki 2011). Such work emphasise the non-linearity of media; of media as 'processual passage'; as human/post-human assemblage; and as milieu of affective action rather than static state or tool of communication between humans. Humans aren't the start and end points of analysis, in other words, and their activities are mixed up in various formations, 'ecologies' and ecosystems with particular characteristics and lives.

'Celebrity ecologies' placed in this frame works to emphasise the larger assemblages and systems within and around which celebrity is enmeshed. It's certainly useful to think of the domains celebrities participate in and create beyond the individualist frame of the celebrity itself – or of how, in Simondon's terms, the celebrity is 'individuated' from, for example a media-film-publicity-profit complex. We would argue that any emphasis in that direction -- and away from the *homage* to possessive individualism that some branches of celebrity studies participate in -- is important. In other ways, an emphasis on the larger 'ecosystems' of which celebrity is a part is, of course, far from new. We might think, for example, of Richard Dyer's classic work considering what 'Judy Garland' means in the context of 1970s/80s gay/queer cultural environments; how her 'tragedy' formed both a potential point of identification and a route out of a particular psychosocial formation of sexual prejudice (Dyer 1986). Or, in more distinctly media-technologically-oriented vein, we could look to how, in *Celebrity and Power*, P. David Marshall explored the specific types of celebrity created by different media forms/assemblages: the TV's encouragement of intimate celebrity, for example, versus the distanced heroism and lionisation engendered through cinema (1997). Such work already deals in some ways with 'ecologies' of celebrity, even if it is not coded as such.

Somewhat paradoxically, given the name, what often gets sidelined in studies of 'media ecology' is the environmental destruction and degradation that media forms are themselves imbricated in. Richard Maxwell and Toby Miller's groundbreaking work in their recent book *Greening the Media* (2011) explores precisely this subject, investigating the supply chains of iPhones, print and computers, the metals, sweat and toxic river pollution which forms them, and puncturing the fiction of energy-free 'cloud' computing by detailing the smokestacks upon which they rely. As Miller points out in his

commentary on this issue as well as with Maxwell in *Greening the Media*, the contradiction between celebrity endorsement of environmental good behaviour, and the environmental effects of the industries that spawn celebrities, can be staggering. For instance, the production of the film *The Beach* inflicted serious long-term damage to Phi Phi Islands National Park in Thailand; and the chlorination of water in Popotla, Baja California in Mexico during the filming of *Titanic* decimated fish stocks; and in 2005 the motion-picture industry was deemed the biggest polluter in LA. The ecological impact of the machinery through which celebrity is produced, therefore, needs to be dragged into the frame of analysis.

Whilst highlighting these larger formations, systems, or assemblages, then, this issue clearly has an emphasis on ‘ecology’ in terms of environment, environmentalism and ‘nature’, and has been produced to help open up questions about what the roles celebrity plays in relation to these domains. The relationships between celebrity and ecological/environmental issues can be understood in multiple ways. One focus is to consider the celebrification of nature and ‘enviro-tainment’. As Dan Brockington’s work has traced, there is a long history of connections between celebrity and environmental conservation; not only through campaigns but also through the changing wildlife presenters and wildlife films. Brockington has argued that today, ‘people need celebrities to get close to nature on their behalf when they themselves cannot’ (2009, p. 3); and that ‘celebrity conservation is as strong and powerful as democracy in western cultures’ (2009, p. 149). This also connects to the role celebrities are increasingly playing in relation to charity and philanthropy, a topic currently being explored in a number of different and interesting ways (Kapoor 2012, Littler 2008, Wheeler 2013, Wilson 2011)

The ‘charismatic megafauna’ of lions, pandas, polar bears, whales, tigers and elephants still garner media attention like very few other parts of nature and ecological systems. They act as the icons of NGOs (e.g. WWF’s panda symbol), figure heavily in children’s books and Disney movies; and can act, like the images of the ice-stranded, ‘drowning’ polar bears, as images designed to ‘bring climate change home’ (Slocum 2004). This celebrification of animals is the focus of John Blewitt’s (2013) paper in this issue, in which he traces how animal celebrity can work as a cipher for telling us something about

what he terms the ‘human socially constructed natural world’. Seen through the lens of Uggie (a dog), Jumbo (an elephant), Guy (a gorilla) and Dolly (the cloned sheep), Blewitt works to explore how what we might mean by ‘celebrity’ and ‘celebrities’ shift ontologically and historically over time through media and technological regimes.

In effect, with this inclusion of so-called ‘animal celebrity’—or ‘non-human celebrity’ more broadly, we are suggesting that theorisations of celebrity might usefully consider fellow ‘companion species’ as a way not only to overcome the problematic separation of humans and nature but also bring the ‘multiple natures’ that exist into a clearer and more conciliatory ethical *rapprochement*. Within geography, Jamie Lorimer (2007, 2012) -- alongside Whatmore 2002, Philo and Wilbert 2000, Wolch and Emel 1995, Evans and Meile 2012 —has built upon such considerations through his ideas around ‘non-human charisma’. Viewed through the three lenses of ecological, aesthetic and corporeal charisma, Lorimer (2007, p. 927) argues that not only does accounting for non-human charisma open ‘analysis to nonhuman difference and to the vast diversity of agency potentials performed by different organisms’ but that its consideration also broadens what he calls ‘space[s] for new affections’ (2007, p. 928) with nature.²

We might connect these interests to the work of ‘actant’ theorists (e.g. Latour, Law and Callon) which considers – just like work on media ecologies -- the role of ‘things’ in the networks that make up social and ecological lives. In this worldview, matter, materialities and things matter in such a way that they get us *to do* things and do things *to* us in ways that require consideration. As Bennett (2010, p. viii) has put it, ‘vibrant matter’—in the form of things like food, commodities, storms, and metal—has ‘thing-power’ that has a capacity to ‘not only impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’. In this, her ‘aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans

² But what about ‘non-charismatic’ or ‘ugly’ natures -- something Lorimer (2007) does not necessarily cover? If the UK food personality Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s *Fish Fight*—a TV, internet and social media campaign dedicated to stopping the wasting of over-quota and ‘wrong types’ of caught fish in EU waters—is anything to go by, then for non-charismatic species such as ‘trash fish’ need the charisma of real celebrities such as Hugh to speak for and about them and act as their celebrated, public face.

to see how analysis of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due' (p. viii).

Taking this into account, we might say that just as non-humans have agency, so to can they sometimes have a kind of celebrity that elevates some 'things', places or entities above others in environmental and ecological politics. Geographical locations and places of concern can take on elevated and often iconic, status. The rainforest (the Amazon in particular) as well as the Arctic, and now the Gulf of Mexico via the BP Deepwater Horizon spill, have taken on special, quasi-celebrity status as places of concern worth 'saving'. In effect, whole species and geographical places—and now even processes/things like 'the climate'—have been 'celebritised' as ways that not only bring awareness to their plight, but also make them act as 'keystone species' or icons in garnering much wider support for environmental politics writ large. This is what Marshall (2013), in his commentary on the papers here shrewdly calls the 'personification of agency' that is then distributed across and within different publics, personas, places, issues and, in the case of the environment, natures, species and individualised 'celebrity' animals.

In this issue, Pramod Nayar (2013) explores how the Narmada Dam has become a celebrity of sorts; a celebrity 'space' and 'process' that has not only coalesced into movements for environmental justice but, through this celebrity, has worked to spawn other forms of environmental politics that trace their tactics, feelings and motivations back to the Narmada Dam. Nayar describes this river-persona as a 'chronotope' that echoes across time and space; the Narmada, through the frictions associated with its contentious media discourses and iconic celebrity-status, has shaped what he terms environmental 'grammars of protest' in and around this part of India.

That non-humans— whether polar bears or rivers—might be understood in particular circumstances as forms of celebrity can also generate concern. To draw on and paraphrase Lorimer (2007, p. 928; emphasis added)—this non-human, thing-based celebrity 'engender[s] *particular* forms of environmental ethics' that might just as easily close down or 'hide' as much as open up politics, movements and ecologies. Thus the

celebritisation of particular species, animals, places and things—given their ability to garner media and human celebrities’ attention and concern—might be understood as having serious implications for ‘the scope of environmental governance and brings the diversity of *biodiversity* conservation into question’ (Lorimer 2007, p. 928). In other words, the celebritisation of more-than-human species and things has the potential to lose sight of the ecological webs that particular animals or species are enmeshed in, upon which they depend upon and co-construct. At the same time, those ‘in-between’ or ‘less celebrifiable’ places and things can be left to the wayside in the wider framings of environmental movements and concerns as celebrified icons garner all the media and movement attention. The same too goes for the invisibility of those humans living nearby, in parallel and/or with the animals, ecologies and/or things that gain celebrity status. What Nick Couldry terms ‘the hidden injuries of media power’ (Couldry 2001) affects things, places and animals as much as humans.

This issue is concerned with the circuits of power that celebrities are both enmeshed in and create. Power can provide celebrities with the capacity to shape understandings of ecology; celebrity ecologies and the powerful *a*/effects they produce can be mobilised to any number of political and politicised ends. This is clearly not simply a matter of ‘caring’ figures devoted to the transmission of message of the environmental good. Indeed, in celebrity biopolitics, as Boykoff and Olsen (2013) detail in this issue, there are celebrities who wish to act as ‘*non-change-agents*’—as they discuss, in the form of oil-industry supported, climate change sceptics—as much as there are those who wish to be, act and produce themselves as ‘change-agents’ working in the service of green politics and progressive social change through ‘awareness raising’ activities as described in the papers by Anderson (2013), McCurdy (2013) and Alexander (2013).

Boykoff and Olson (2013) explore the ways that a powerfully funded but extremely small and scientifically-marginalised group of climate sceptics have become media celebrities in their own right. Tracing these ‘merchants of doubt’ back to the US-based Wise Use movement and tobacco-lobby, they denote such sceptics as a kind of ‘keystone species’ in the fraught world of media portrayals of climate change science and politics. For them, the motivations, drive and exhilaration of this infamous species of climate change

celebrity (cf. Boykoff and Goodman 2009) is worth exploring in order to understand both the cultural politics surrounding the contentious debates in climate change cultures and, in particular, the power and powerful processes that lie behind their elevated voices and celebrity.

McCurdy (2013), on the other hand, in an attempt to conceptualise what he sees as a new type of celebrity-activist in Tamsin Omond, parses the ways that UK media works to frame her actions in relation to environmental causes. He discusses how her privileged background and class-position has been framed by newspapers of different ideological bents. As he argues, Omond's 'conspicuous activism' has worked to, in a sense, fit her and her activities in a hyper-individualist framing that hews to the cultural politics of neo-liberalism and the contemporary moment that so fully defines the creation, focus and politics of celebrities. Alison Anderson's paper also takes up the question of the mediation of climate change activism, this time looking at newspaper coverage of the Rio +20 Earth Summit. This paper considers how celebrity interventions impacted upon and shaped media coverage of the summit, both 'officially', in terms of endorsements by Robert Redford, Paul McCartney, Penelope Cruz and Jude Law for Greenpeace's *Save the Arctic* campaign, and unofficially, via the *Climate Siren* activists who chained themselves to the railings at Buckingham Palace holding a quote from Prince Charles. Anderson finds that celebrity was a key factor in generating any coverage to a summit with reduced media interest, but questions to what extent it served to reproduce existing power asymmetries.

Alexander's (2013) paper raises another issue about the biopolitical power of celebrity ecologies by considering their development through social media. She explores how the 'green vampire' -- aka Ian Somerhalder, star of the US TV series *Vampire Diaries* -- uses Twitter to communicate with fans to apparently attempt to mobilise them to lead more ecologically-friendly lifestyles. With 3.5 million followers, his audience is vast, but given how much we know about the knowledge/action gap, and the problems of individual consumer-based approaches to environmental crises, does this matter? To what extent does having Facebook 'likes' and Twitter followers of green celebrities and celebrity-fronted environmental campaigns 'count' as a form of politics? As P. David

Marshall's work indicates, engaging with how social media reformulates celebrity, and intervenes in the sphere of ecological/green politics, is necessary.

The relationships, dynamics and ecologies between celebrity and environmentalism are neither uniform nor consistent. The involvement of human celebrities with environmental causes can both generate attention to environmental campaigns and work to increase environmental degradation. As the journalist and activist George Monbiot – himself no stranger to either sphere of celebrity or environmentalism - has argued, it is difficult to generalize about celebrities, as the mode of engagement by 'informed' and careful celebrities like Brian Eno or Thom Yorke is a world away from that of celebrities like Bob Geldof or Bono, who 'managed to destroy the causes that they claimed to support and to supplant a call for justice with a call for charity' (Littler 2009). As Toby Miller (2013) points out in this issue, whilst celebrities promoting green causes can work to actively obscure their narcissistic complicity in the generation of environmental degradation, it is also the case that 'tiny superstructural' changes can be made or triggered by celebrity interventions. Celebrity ecologies are co-produced through a nexus of power relations and uneven power geometries (Massey 1993) which help frame and shape understandings of the environment and environmental politics. It therefore seems necessary to explore both how they interact in such diverse ways with these power dynamics; and to identify how these flamboyant instances of ecologically-oriented fame can work to actively obscure, silence and render invisible other aspects of our social, cultural and environmental ecologies.

References

- Alexander, J., 2013. The case of the green vampire: Eco-celebrity, twitter and youth engagement. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Anderson, A., 2013. 'Together we can save the arctic': Celebrity advocacy and the rio earth summit 2012. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Bennett, J., 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Blewitt, J., 2013. What's new pussy cat? A genealogy of animal celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Boykoff, M. and Goodman, M., 2009. Conspicuous Redemption? Reflections on the promises and perils of the 'celebritization' of climate change. *Geoforum*, 40, 395-406.
- Boykoff, M. and Olson, S., 2013. 'Wise contrarians': A keystone species in contemporary climate science, politics and policy. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Brockington, D., 2009. *Celebrity and the environment*. London: Zed Books.
- Cooper, A., 2008. *Celebrity diplomacy*. Boulder: Paradigm.
- Couldry, N., 2001. 'The hidden injuries of media power' in *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1:2, 155-177
- Dyer, R. (1986) *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. London: BFI.
- Evans, A. and Miele, M., 2012. Between food and flesh: How animals are made to matter (and not matter) within food consumption practices. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30, 298-314.
- Fridell, G. and Konings, M., (eds.) 2013. *Age of icons*, Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Fuller, M., (2007) *Media Ecologies* MIT Press
- Goodman, M. and Barnes, C., 2011. Star/poverty space: The making of the 'development celebrity'. *Celebrity Studies*, 2 (1), 69-85.
- Kapoor, I., (2012) *Celebrity Humanitarianism: The Ideology of Global Charity*. London: Routledge.
- Koerner, A., 2013. Oscars 2013 Red Carpet – Helen Hunt in Eco-Friendly H&M. Ecorazzi.Com 2013. <http://www.ecorazzi.com/2013/02/24/oscars-2013-red-carpet-helen-hunt-in-eco-friendly-hm/>. Accessed 1 March 2013.
- Littler, J., 2008. "I feel your pain": Cosmopolitan charity and the public fashioning of the celebrity soul. *Social Semiotics*, 18 (2), pp237-251.
- Littler, J., 2009. 'Mediating climate change' Interview with Helen Bird, Max Boykoff, Mike Goodman and George Monbiot, *Soundings* 48, 2009 pp47-64.
- Lorimer, J., 2007. Nonhuman charisma. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 24 (5), 911-932.
- Lorimer, J., 2012. Multinatural geographies for the anthropocene. *Progress in Human Geography*, 36 (5), pp593-612.

- Marshall, P.D., 2013. Personifying agency: The public/persona/place/issue continuum. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Marshall, P. D., (1997) *Celebrity and Power*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Maxwell, R. and Miller, T., (2011) *Greening the Media*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mccurdy, P., 2013. Conceptualizing celebrity activists: The case of tamsin omond. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Meehan, K., Shaw, I. and Marston, S., 2013. Political geographies of the object. *Political Geography*, 33, pp1-10.
- Miller, T., 2013. Why Coldplay sucks. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Nayar, P., 2013. Watery friction: River Narmada, the new grammar of protest and celebrity. *Celebrity Studies*.
- Parrika, J., 2010. *Insect Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Parrika, J., 2011. 'Media Ecologies and Imaginary Media: Transversal Expansions, Contractions, and Foldings' *Fibreculture* 116.
- Philo, C. and Wilbert, C., (eds.) 2000. *Animal spaces, beastly places: New geographies of human-animal relations*, London: Routledge.
- Rojek, C., 2001. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Slocum, R., 2004. Polar bears and energy-efficient lightbulbs: Strategies to bring climate change home. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 22, pp413-438.
- Turner, G., 2009. *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. London: Sage.
- Whatmore, S., 2002. *Hybrid geographies: Natures, cultures, spaces*. London: Sage.
- Wheeler, M., 2013. *Celebrity Politics*. John Wiley.
- Wilson, J., 2011. 'A New Kind of Star is Born: Audrey Hepburn and the global governmentalisation of female stardom', *Celebrity Studies* 2:1, 56-68
- Wolch, J. and Emel, J., 1995. Bringing the animals back in. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13, 632-636.