

Celebrity Culture

Kristine Harmon

A dozen press agents working overtime can do terrible things to the human spirit.
—Cecil B. DeMille, playing himself in Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

Academic inquiry into celebrity culture has traditionally exhibited a bit of terror: the sheer power of celebrities to move and change the world, current events, political votes, and fundraising campaigns makes scholars and cultural watchdogs nervous. The technological and media changes that have occurred so quickly with such force, that have given birth to our celebrity culture in a relatively short period of time, are for many disheartening.

Yet, within the books listed here, readers will find a few of the positive outcomes of celebrity culture noted: new kinds of communities shaped around artistic participation, voices heard because of the passionate appeal and interplay between stardom and fandom, evidence that an individual can in fact effect social change and rise in social status. For some, stars provide the language and the means to understand our own selves better—our desires for fame, our views of our own (un)successful lives, our moral and social values—and create a common ground for us, while other areas of our fast-paced modern world that once composed a common ground seem to be slipping away.

Debates on the value or harm of celebrity culture occur in two kinds of work: biography and social critique. While biography is often a player in the star system itself, written within the media machine that produces the stars themselves, the social critique of celebrity has become more and more prevalent in academic literature. Starting in the 1970s, with the seminal works of film studies scholars Richard Dyer (*Stars*) and Laura Mulvey (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”) and film critic Richard Schickel (*His Picture in the Papers*), celebrities have become an acceptable research topic, a way to “read” contemporary culture and social change.

Kristine Harmon is Assistant Editor of *The Hedgehog Review*, Assistant Director of Publications at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture, and an independent filmmaker.

Within studies of celebrity culture, two main approaches dominate: the sociological and the semiotic. The sociological views stars and the mechanisms that create and promote them as the phenomenon; their work is secondary and inconsequential. The semiotic reverses this, and draws on linguistic theories to read celebrities through the meanings and significations attached to their work. In recent years, these two approaches have merged, as interdisciplinary approaches have gained in acceptance, and as more disciplines, such as psychology, have begun to accept celebrity as a topic that can produce fruitful results. However, as the books listed below reveal, the study of celebrity culture remains fairly limited: celebrity is widely written about in film and literary studies, but rarely in philosophy or the social sciences. And for scholars themselves, celebrity seems to be a topic one can “dabble” in, while few scholars or writers study the field over a career—proof perhaps that celebrity remains, as Diane Negra suggests in *Off-White Hollywood*, “one of the most devalued forms of social knowledge,” despite the fact that “it is a form of knowledge that we all possess, often with a high degree of expertise” (8).

The History of Fame

There is nothing new about fame. As Braudy’s momentous *Frenzy of Renown* argues, while current celebrity culture is a new phenomenon, fame itself has always been manifest in Western society. Braudy charts the many ways in which fame has legitimated actions, persons, or values over 2,000 years, and what such legitimation reveals about a society’s particular understandings of “what a person was or could be” (585). Quebedeaux also looks at the formation of a self—this time the religious self in relation to the stars produced by American religion, from the leaders of the Second Great Awakening to contemporary media moguls Jerry Falwell and Oral Roberts.

Across the Atlantic, Donoghue examines the end of the patronage system for the literary arts, which forced the development of a new social group—readers—in order to validate taste and the accompanying fame-making mechanisms of reviews and critics. Charnes examines the Shakespearean plays *King Richard III*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* and concludes that the mechanisms that create notoriety—a kind of “pathological fame,” where fame dis-attaches from the actual figure and becomes pure representation—are the same mechanisms that make history.

Collins traces the history of gossip surrounding American political leaders in the twentieth century, from the birth of the nation to the Clinton administration, while deCordova follows the rapid development of the star system in early Hollywood, which was critical to the development and sustenance of American film. Gabler reflects on the merging of media transformation and self-conscious identity formation in *Life the Movie*, where life itself now seems a medium we each “perform” in.

- Braudy, Leo. *The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Charnes, Linda. *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.
- Collins, Gail. *Scorpion Tongues: Gossip, Celebrity, and American Politics*. New York: Morrow, 1998.
- deCordova, Richard. *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Donoghue, Frank. *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Gabler, Neal. *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. New York: Knopf, 1998.
- Quebedeaux, Richard. *By What Authority: The Rise of Personality Cults in American Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982.

The Changing Nature of Celebrity

Celebrities of the twentieth and twenty-first century differ from all previous ones, as the lines between public and private, ordinary and famous, proper and improper have narrowed or even disappeared. While we once honored wealthy industrial elites, politicians, inventors, and entrepreneurs whom we never hoped to meet, we now have celebrity daughters, celebrity criminals, and celebrity office assistants. As celebrity culture has been democratized and brought within reach of the ordinary citizen, so too the formation of our desires and expectations toward celebrity have changed.

Dyer wrote *Stars* in 1979 in order to develop within film studies the intellectual study of celebrities. Dyer's book, one of the first to appear, focuses on the "star image" as a depository for the dominant ideologies of Western society. Still dominant in the literature, image theory is now only one of multiple approaches used to study celebrity—as we see in Gledhill, who takes us through the last twenty-five years of star theory.

Marshall examines how a nebulous, difficult-to-define locus of power now centers on celebrities, who play the role of institutions in structuring meaning, crystallizing ideologies, and providing interpretive tools for understanding culture. Giles, a former pop journalist, attempts to address this exercise of power from a psychological point of view, and in particular, the effect the system has on stars themselves.

Cowen makes the case that, while fame may be harmful for the fame-seekers, our democratized quest for fame is actually the mark of a successful society. Rojek posits that celebrity is only possible in the age of man—that the historical turn toward universal equality and freedom has forced society to "cultivate personal style as the antidote

for formal democratic equality” (9). Glynn argues that these ideological shifts resulted in access shifts, birthing our current “tabloid culture” and its promotion of everyday Joes and Janes into instant household names.

- Cowen, Tyler. *What Price Fame?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Dyer, Richard. *Stars*. London: BFI, 1998.
- Giles, David. *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Gledhill, Christine, ed. *Stardom*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Glynn, Kevin. *Tabloid Culture: Trash Taste, Popular Power, and the Transformation of American Television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Marshall, P. David. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Rojek, Chris. *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion, 2001.

Celebrity Case Studies

Biographies are written about virtually any kind of celebrity one could want to read about—from business billionaires and screenwriters to the latest criminal deified by the tabloids. Yet as most celebrity theory suggests, these works are rarely simple accounts of lives and are themselves often objects that feed into the celebrity machines. The case studies gathered here from a variety of disciplines each use the life and work of a particular celebrity to examine the mechanisms at work in the creation and maintenance of celebrity status. In particular, they analyze the gap between the “fictional contexts” (Fouz-Hernández and Jarman-Ivens) that surround celebrities and the realities of their daily lives—and what these gaps say about such social institutions and forces as gender, commodification, the formation of identity, and celebrity itself.

- Elliott, Anthony. *The Mourning of John Lennon*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Fouz-Hernández, Santiago, and Freya Jarman-Ivens, eds. *Madonna's Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to Her Cultural Transformations, 1983–2003*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2004.
- Goldman, Herbert G. *Banjo Eyes: Eddie Cantor and the Birth of Modern Stardom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Guilbert, Georges-Claude. *Madonna as Postmodern Myth: How One Star's Self-Construction Rewrites Sex, Gender, Hollywood and the American Dream*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2002.
- Leff, Leonard J. *Hemingway and His Conspirators: Hollywood, Scribners, and the Making of American Celebrity Culture*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997.

- McLean, Adrienne L. *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.
- Mustazza, Leonard. *Frank Sinatra and Popular Culture: Essays on an American Icon*. Westport: Praeger, 1998.
- Schickel, Richard. *His Picture in the Papers: A Speculation on Celebrity in America Based on the Life of Douglas Fairbanks, Sr.* New York: Charterhouse, 1973.
- Schroeder, Alan. *Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House*. Boulder: Westview, 2004.

Theory and Celebrity Culture

While there is no “celebrity theorist,” per se, a handful of theorists are found repeatedly in celebrity literature. Their common thread is a picture of late capitalist society as commodity-based, where the actions of the individual can be equated with acts of consumption. These theories swing heavily in favor of large cultural processes, against which the individual is powerless, or even passive. Whether looking at the individual (Berger, et al.), the social (Baudrillard and DeBord), or the cultural (Adorno and Barthes), these theorists highlight how contemporary society no longer contains the “real thing,” but packages meaning and achieves interaction only through the exchange of representation.

- Adorno, Theodore. *The Culture Industry*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993.
- ----- . *Image, Music, Text*. New York: Noonday, 1977.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Berger, John, et al. *Ways of Seeing*. London: BBC and Penguin, 1972.
- DeBord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Red, 1983.
- Witkin, Robert W. *Adorno on Popular Culture*. London: Routledge, 2003.

The Mechanisms of Celebrity

It takes more than a village to create a celebrity. The vast, interlocking web of resources and institutions involved in creating and maintaining a single celebrity is astounding. From media outlets to fan clubs and agents, from media products to gossip columnists, a star is never solitary, but often the result of hundreds of backstage orchestrations and player deals. *High Visibility*, written by marketing and communications specialists, defines these backstage processes, while *Understanding Celebrity* and *Fame Games* take an industrial approach and attempt to map out these processes from “inside” the various fame-generating institutions. *Claims to Fame* examines how and by whom these processes are controlled—both inside and outside in the larger world.

As *Fame Games* demonstrates, once-peripheral media forms (“entertainment” or fictional forms) are moving toward the center (“true” news) of the media landscape. This progression has had profound effects on politics, as the books by Schmuhl and Corner and Pels track. West and Orman ask what then becomes of democratic political process if the popular is also the political, while van Zoonen examines the possibility that such merging actually encourages citizen participation.

As the media landscape has changed, so too has the importance of personality. In the literary world, Glass and Moran trace the process by which literary success has come to hinge on both authorial talent *and* image, while Toynbee examines the blueprint myth underlying all successful musicians’ images: they must “come from the common people but [make] extraordinary music” (ix).

- Corner, John, and Dick Pels. *Media and the Restyling of Politics: Consumerism, Celebrity and Cynicism*. London: Sage, 2003.
- Gamson, Joshua. *Claims to Fame: Celebrity in Contemporary America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Glass, Loren. *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.
- Moran, Joe. *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America*. London: Pluto, 2000.
- Rein, Irving J., Philip Kotler, and Martin R. Stoller. *High Visibility*. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1987.
- Schmuhl, Robert. *Statecraft and Stagecraft: American Political Life in the Age of Personality*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.
- Toynbee, Jason. *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions*. London: Arnold, 2000.
- Turner, Graeme. *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage, 2004.
- Turner, Graeme, Frances Bonner, and P. David Marshall. *Fame Games: The Production of Celebrity in Australia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- West, Darrell M., and John Orman. *Celebrity Politics*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003.
- van Zoonen, Liesbet. *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005.

Celebrity Fans

One chief mechanism in the maintenance of celebrity status is the audience. Over time, fans have become more and more important, even in the organizing of a celebrity’s personal life. Once viewing fandom as delusional or even psychotic, scholarly work on fans has in the last ten years approached fandom as a serious field of inquiry and claimed that fandom is a complex arena in which to study the relationship between fans, stars, entertainment texts, and the media industries.

It is also here that one finds work that casts off the dominant-force theories seen above and returns a degree of power to the individual. Lewis and Harrington and Bielby posit that fanship is both an activity and the active management of identity, while Ang, Jenkins, and Bacon-Smith look at the institutional and communal power exercised by fans.

Cinematic theories of spectatorship provide another approach to fandom. These investigations approach fandom by examining who does the looking and who is looked at. Mulvey's landmark article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," was the first work to posit this framework, which has been heavily debated ever since. Stacey turns Mulvey's gender dynamic (men who look at women) around and looks at the relation between female fans and female stars in the heyday of Hollywood.

- Ang, Ien. *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- Bacon-Smith, Camille. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.
- Harrington, C. Lee, and Denise D. Bielby. *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Lewis, Lisa A., ed. *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16.3 (1975): 6–18.
- Stacey, Jackie. *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship*. London: Routledge, 1994.

Gender, Race, and Celebrity

Mulvey's essay introduced "cinepsychoanalysis" into the field—an approach that applies the thought of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, among others, to develop theories of desire and pleasure through spectatorship. We watch stars because it is self-fulfilling: it constructs an "ideal" spectator (the white male) who participates in fixed (safe, defined, non-threatening) identities for the object watched.

This theory and its picture of power relations paved the way for today's discussions of gender and race, which have turned from the spectator to focus almost solely (with the exception of Dyer) on representation itself. Studlar looks at the male silent film stars from 1915 to 1930 and uses these stars to study masculinity as a process, a performance even. Gever also uses case studies, this time looking at the interplay between the "new" category of the lesbian celebrity and the process of celebrity self-stylization. Negra's case studies reveal the promise of American pluralism in the packaging of famous ethnic actresses across the twentieth century. Dyer, on the other hand, looks at what the audi-

ence reads back into the media representations of celebrities—particularly when the audience claims membership in a particular race or sexuality.

Several scholars look at media products as a way to map the social roles given to particular groups. Basinger looks at “the woman’s film” of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, and finds that the genre stands as “something contradictory, elusive, hypocritical, and deceptive” (7), and also descriptive of women’s social roles in these decades. Valdivia surveys general media culture, from films to lingerie ads, in terms of its “identity continuum”—the meanings it assigns to a female’s life stages and various roles.

- Basinger, Jeanine. *A Woman’s View: How Hollywood Spoke to Women, 1930–1960*. New York: Knopf, 1993.
- Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1986.
- Gever, Martha. *Entertaining Lesbians: Celebrity, Sexuality, and Self-Invention*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Negra, Diane. *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. *The Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Valdivia, Angharad N. *A Latina in the Land of Hollywood and Other Essays on Media Culture*. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000.

Celebrity as Text

Finally, in keeping with the semiotic tradition of celebrity studies, it seems fitting to offer up a selection of artistic works that comment on celebrity culture. From Chaucer’s early poem, “The House of Fame,” whose hero-poet wrestles with the fame bestowed on him by society and the Church’s emphasis on heavenly (rather than earthly) praise, to Martin Scorsese’s film *King of Comedy*, in which an amateur comedian jokes to a national television audience that it is “better to be king for a night, than schmuck for a lifetime!”—these celebrities and their works speak to us, even give voice to our own desires, as they reflect back to us the realities and illusions of today’s fame.

Films

- Altman, Robert. *Come Back to the Five & Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*. 1982. Based on the play by Ed Graczyk. Quincy: Baker’s Plays, 1982.
- Crowe, Cameron. *Almost Famous*. 2000.
- Lumet, Sidney. *Dog Day Afternoon*. 1975.
- ----- . *Network*. 1976.
- Scorsese, Martin. *King of Comedy*. 1982.
- Wilder, Billy. *Sunset Boulevard*. 1950.

Texts

- Chaucer. "The House of Fame." Ed. Walter W. Skeat c. 1383; London: Oxford University Press, 1893.
- Monaco, James. *Celebrity: The Media as Image Makers*. New York: Delta, 1978.
- Polak, Maralyn Lois. *The Writer as Celebrity: Intimate Interviews*. New York: Evans 1986.

Visual Arts

- Hamilton, Peter, and Roger Hargreaves. *The Beautiful and the Damned: The Creation of Identity in Nineteenth Century Photography*. Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2001.
- Howe, Peter. *Paparazzi*. New York: Artisan, 2005.
- Reaves, Wendy Wick. *Celebrity Culture in Caricature*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1998.
- Walker, John A. *Art and Celebrity*. London: Pluto, 2003.