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Celebrity Society

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CELEBRITY SOCIETY

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Abstract

The study of celebrity is a significant interdisciplinary growth area with established concepts that account for the historical development of celebrity (celebritisation); the powerful identifications audiences and viewers have with mediated celebrity personae (intimacy at a distance); and the economic imperatives for the formatting and branding of celebrity names in market society (celebrity-as-commodity). Celebrity personae provides a structure not only for the organisation of all persons operating in public but for concepts of individuality and models of modern subjectivity oriented to the asset of recognition. Celebrity society is an analytic concept marking out a certain territory in contrast to 'celebrity culture'. Critical of the latter's focus on representation and textual analysis, it emphasizes celebrity as a historically specific social form in its own right, yet underpinned by what it analyses as systematic interdependencies of individualisation, mediatisation, democratisation and commodification. Focusing on various components of celebrity production, marketing, distribution and consumption, it allows for key moments of discontinuity as well as the long-term continuities marking the history of celebritisation.

Main Text

The study of celebrity represents a significant interdisciplinary growth area in social sciences and humanities over the last 20 years, a field in which constellation of concepts, such as 'celebritisation', 'the celebrity-commodity' and 'para-social interaction', have become commonplace. Early definitions of stars as a 'powerless elite' (Alberoni, 1972) have been overturned by various

taxonomies of fame and celebrity personae that show how these most powerful forms of identification within modern society provide a structure not only for the organisation of all persons operating in public but also for concepts of individuality and models of modern subjectivity (Marshall, 1997; Rojek, 2012; Van Krieken). It is widely agreed that fame has come to constitute a form of power itself (Gabler, 1995, p.184-5).

1970s film theory's interest in the ideological content and systems of beliefs embodied by 'stars' (Dyer, 1979) has bequeathed much to today's research, – taken forward within cultural studies and dominated by the term 'celebrity culture' – not least a focus on the mediatized processes of 'celebrification': the mechanisms by which individuals are transformed into celebrity personae. The idealisations and identifications celebrities represent and stimulate for their viewers and readers are understood as intimacy at a distance (Gamson, 1994; Rojek 2001). More sociological accounts have contributed a focus on how the power of the system of celebrity has 'infiltrated' whole areas of public life, from politics, literary publishing, sport and business to the academy (Corner and Pels, 2003; van Krieken, 2012). For example, the personalized quality of politics and the reconstruction of the electorate as a media audience in an age of television has the consequence of 'convergence in the source of power between the political leader and other forms of celebrity' (Marshall, 1997, p. 19), underlying the importance of both Weberian and psychoanalytic investigations into the emotive and irrational aspects of celebrity power. Some argue that as a status system celebrity has a function of social integration, filling the gap of sacredness in a post-religious world (Braudy, 1986; Frow, 1998; Rojek, 2001), organizing the forms of recognition and belonging in a secular society and creating common bonds between groups: just like saints, celebrities attract holy locations, worship, death cults, rituals and relics. Those pursuing empirically based sociological research focus on the internal everyday operations of media organisations in the production and marketing of celebrity. Concepts from political economy are used to explain the increasing circulation of celebrities-as-commodities (Marshall, 1997) – the commercial importance of 'name branding', 'formatting' (Ryan, 1992) and more recently 'content streaming' (Murray, 2003) across multiple platforms – as a consequence of the vertical integration strategies deployed by media conglomerates to mitigate commercial risk and uncertainty.

Many of these accounts mine the seam opened up in Boorstin's (1962) attack on celebrity as the epitome of the American mass media 'pseudo-event', followed by Sennett's (1972) critique of the intrusion of personality performance in public life. They assess the extent to which post-celluloid forms of celebrity, beginning with the invention of the 'picture personality' and the close-up in the 1910s, and the evolution into the Hollywood motion picture 'star' who came to be regarded as having an existence outside his/her film

characters (deCordova, 1991; Schickel, 1985; Gamson, 1994), are less authentic and more illusory than in centuries past. A normative question underlies these accounts: is modern celebrity and its 'viewer society' therefore symptomatic, or even a contributory cause, of cultural decline where simulation and surface trumps substance? Partly this question rests on the assumption that today's mass media and hyper visually-oriented societies represent an epochal step-change in the reach, power and saturation of celebrity in public life. Another approach suggests they are the extension of a long-standing set of conditions which nonetheless work their way out unevenly across different social institutions, legal constraints and techno-media platforms each of which fashion celebrity-audience relations in specific ways.

This is the starting point for the conceptual framework of 'celebrity society'; whilst drawing on much of this literature it moves away from what it sees as an over-reliance on textual analysis and individual celebrity case studies in order to provide a robust theorization of celebritisation as historically, socially and institutionally determinate (Turner, 2014; Gamson, 1994; van Krieken, 2012). Questions of wider systemic significance, distinctiveness, applicability, contextualisation and generalisability – conceptualizing a particular instance to the general social pattern – require formulation and this is the springboard for the approach of celebrity society.

From a starting point that celebrity – via the long-term 'meta-process' of celebritisation (Driessens, 2013, p.643) – is a particular type of rationality in the structuring and organisation of social relations, van Krieken (2012 p.138) foregrounds the complex 'chains of interdependence' between long term historical and institutionally-specific processes. Celebrity society is understood by social theorists as an historically specific social form in its own right, yet underpinned by the interdependencies of individualisation, mediatisation, democratisation and commodification. In order to relativise the modernity of celebrity, and influenced by Braudy's forceful proposition in *The Frenzy of Renown* (1997) that fame and the deeds it represents have always depended on image management, a number of authors locate the tropes of modern celebrity to at least as far back as the eighteenth century (Morgan, 2011; Briggs and Burke, 2002; Van Krieken, 2012). Briggs and Burke (2002) point out that the celebritisation of politics into a public spectacle is not the consequence of the relatively recent medium of television. And Van Krieken argues, via Elias, that celebrity society is the modern heir to court society and today's mass mediated celebrities are 'democratised aristocrats' (2012, p.8), competitively performative, permanently visible and subject to the blurring of their personal and public lives. Celebritisation of society is a development of individualization such that social institutions, social interactions and the individual sense of self have, over time, become increasingly organised

around an ever more differentiated network of increasing numbers of highly visible and recognised individuals (van Krieken, 2012, p.5).

It seems indisputable that celebritisation is a form of 'attention capital' (van Krieken, 2012) associated with the social mobility afforded by the rise of democratization and concomitantly the decline of inherited status positions. However a question remains about the extent to which the attention capital enjoyed by the 'celebrity function' is a neurosis of modern life; or, to take a Foucauldian view, a necessary assertion of the calculating 'enterprising self' for whom destiny is a matter of individual responsibility achieved by continual self-assessment in comparison with significant others (Rose, 1996); or essentially progressive because it represents a lower threshold for individualization allowing an increasing opportunity for the many to gain the assets associated with recognition (van Krieken, 2012).

Notwithstanding the answers to that, what seems important to advocates of 'celebrity society' is the consequence of not assuming a priori definition of celebrity's meanings, before having analysed the various components of celebrity production, distribution and consumption across various of its sub-fields: the historical relationship between celebrity and 'society' being diverse and piecemeal rather than singular and monolithic. Accordingly 'celebrity society' emphasizes key moments of discontinuity as well as the long-term continuities marking the history of celebrity and celebritisation.

SEE ALSO: Audience Research; Charisma; Culture; Foucault, Michel; Mass media, theories of; Mass Society; Meritocracy; Saussure, Ferdinand de; Freud, Sigmund; Social Status; Society

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