DR. PHILIP DRAKE IS DEPUTY
HEAD OF GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN THE DEPARTMENT OF FILM,
MEDIA AND JOURNALISM AT THE
UNIVERSITY OF STIRLING AND A
MEMBER OF THE STIRLING MEDIA
RESEARCH INSTITUTE. HE HAS
PUBLISHED WIDELY ON STARDOM
AND CELEBRITY, ACTING AND
PERFORMANCE, AND HOLLYWOOD
CINEMA, INCLUDING ESSAYS
IN *STARDOM AND CELEBRITY: A
READER* (SAGE, 2007) AND (WITH
M. HIGGINS) *FRAMING CELEBRITY:
NEW DIRECTIONS IN CELEBRITY
CULTURE* (ROUTLEDGE, 2006). HE
IS CURRENTLY WRITING A BOOK
ON TALENT AND CELEBRITY IN
HOLLYWOOD CINEMA.

PROFESSOR ANDY MIAH IS CHAIR
OF ETHICS AND EMERGING
TECHNOLOGIES IN THE FACULTY
OF BUSINESS & CREATIVE
INDUSTRIES AT THE UNIVERSITY
OF THE WEST OF SCOTLAND,
FELLOW OF THE INSTITUTE
FOR ETHICS AND EMERGING
TECHNOLOGIES, USA, AND
FELLOW AT FACT, THE FOUNDATION
FOR ART AND CREATIVE
TECHNOLOGY, UK. HE IS AUTHOR
OF *GENETICALLY MODIFIED
ATHLETES* (ROUTLEDGE, 2004)
AND CO-AUTHOR WITH DR EMMA
RICH OF *THE MEDICALIZATION OF
CYBERSPACE* (ROUTLEDGE, 2008)
AND EDITOR OF *HUMAN FUTURES:
ART IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY*
(LIVERPOOL UNIVERSITY PRESS
AND FACT, 2008).

THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF CELEBRITY

PHILIP DRAKE AND ANDY MIAH

> Celebrities are a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary Western culture. Although the phenomenon of celebrity itself predates the twentieth century, the rise of the modern mass media – popular newspapers, cinema, radio, and television, and more recently the Internet and other digital communication technologies – has done much to promote and circulate public knowledge of celebrities during the last 100 years. The presence of multi-channel digital television, radio, and the World Wide Web in Western households at the turn of the twenty-first century has not only increased the number of places in which celebrities can be seen and heard, but has also required media producers to compete with each other and with alternative leisure activities for the attention of fragmented audiences, an increasingly precious commodity.

The rise of celebrity culture is inextricably linked to developments in media systems that operate within capitalist systems of commodity exchange. Most obviously, celebrities provide a well-proven route to attracting and retaining audiences, helping to offset the risks inherent in cultural production. They also play out a fantasy of the individual simultaneously performing within public and the private

spheres. As P. David Marshall neatly puts it, celebrities might be seen as a "production locale for an elaborate discourse on the individual and individuality" (1997: 4). However the ubiquity of celebrity culture does not mean that its considerable diversity can be ignored. A cursory glance through the prime-time television schedules, for instance, reveals how one might choose between shows featuring celebrity hosts and guests, contest-based reality television shows that participate in the construction of celebrity, personality driven lifestyle programming, sports shows featuring star athletes and commentators, and even political shows with celebrity journalists. All of this is indicative not just of the pervasiveness of modern celebrity culture but also its diversity and breadth. The various kinds of celebrities – celebrity chefs, reality television performers, star athletes – and the places in which they perform provide audiences with a complex and differing set of relationships and points of identification, even if they tend to be united by how they are mediated with a constructed sense of intimacy and address (using conventions such as the point-of-view shot in cinema and the personal mode of address in radio). Media celebrities thus offer us forms of "para-social" interaction (Horton and Wohl 1956) – para-social in that they reproduce the effect of a relationship between performer and audience despite being a predominantly one-way flow of communication. As Richard Dyer (1979) has observed (examining film stars), they are simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary, easily consumed (in mediated form) yet remote from us. This paradox of stardom is striking, as he notes:

> It is one of the ironies of the whole star phenomenon that all these assertions of the reality of the inner-self ... take place in one of the aspects of modern life that is most associated with the invasion and destruction of the inner self and the corruptibility of public life, namely the mass media. (Dyer 1986: 15)

Thus in spite of the ubiquity of celebrity texts, stars themselves usually remain inaccessible, available for consumption only through managed media performances or fame rituals such as book signings and orchestrated public appearances.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINITION

Before we examine the nature of contemporary celebrity culture, we shall briefly attempt to define the term "celebrity," as it is often used interchangeably with "star," "stardom," "fame," and related concepts such as "heroism" and "renown." The term "celebrity" is from the Latin *celebrem/celebritas/celeber* and derived both from the verb meaning "to celebrate" and the noun describing one who is well-known/famous, from the French *célèbre*. The original use referred to a form of ritual or ceremony, but by around the fourteenth century it had begun to be used to describe the condition of being famous, that is, fame in the public domain. By the mid nineteenth century it was used to describe

a person of fame, that is, the descriptive noun "a celebrity." As a term, celebrity was originally used positively, but in the last fifty years or so has been used in a more negative manner, to describe someone famous for not doing very much, and contrasted with the term "hero" denoting someone of more verifiable talent and accomplishment.

Chris Rojek offers an interesting taxonomy, differentiating between "ascribed," "achieved," or "attributed" celebrity (2001: 17). According to Rojek, "ascribed celebrity" concerns lineage, such as in the case of the monarchy, and a phenomenon that clearly precedes the modern mass media. "Achieved celebrity," on the other hand, derives from accomplishments in open competition, such as film acting or sports, and the recognition of talent in a particular field. Finally, Rojek describes "attributed celebrity" as the "concentrated representation of an individual as noteworthy or exceptional by cultural intermediaries" (18). This attempts to distinguish between individuals deemed to have gained fame through exceptional skill in a particular occupation (for instance golfer Tiger Woods or film star Julia Roberts) and those whose fame has been notably attributed by their media representation or scandal. A reality television celebrity (British reality television performer Jade Goody, for instance) is often considered to be an individual known foremost for their public profile and media circulation, having become famous by appearing on a specifically fame producing show, and would correspond to Rojek's "attributed" form of celebrity. Implicitly Rojek's taxonomy also recognizes a distinction often made in more vernacular terms between "A" list and "Z" list celebrities as those most often relegated to the third category are those individuals who appear in more populist entertainment formats.

Although such categories have some utility, there are clear difficulties in agreeing what is meant by "achievement," and defining skill and talent are issues bound up with relative assumptions of cultural value and politics. The term "star" is mostly used to denote an individual who is highly celebrated and deemed exceptional in a particular field or profession, and most commonly associated with performers in popular media such as music, television, and, most commonly, cinema (Dyer 1998 [1979]). The "celebrity," on the other hand, is usually considered to be an individual who is first and foremost known for their public profile and media circulation rather than their skilled performances in a particular field. For some people a renowned football player represents one of the highest forms of skill, while for others they would simply be known through their fame and celebrity persona. For example, we might ask whether the fame of Piers Morgan, former editor of British tabloid *The Mirror* turned *America's Got Talent* (NBC, 2006–) judge and *Celebrity Apprentice* (NBC, 2008) winner, has been based on his talents as a performer or as a self-publicist, for instance. The divination of talent rather than its less valued counterpart – media publicity – presents a problem of definition.

To avoid such difficulties a more productive way of understanding celebrity is as a *mediating frame* rather than as the particular quality

of an individual. It is the public recognition and circulation of celebrity that is absolutely intrinsic to its being. The mediation of the famous individual to a public, such as a viewing audience, is a critical quality of celebrity. Celebrity presents a form of public performance, describing both an individual's mediated persona as well as the qualities (fame, glamour, and so on) that they are perceived by an audience to possess. Yet we must go further than this and also acknowledge the importance of "cultural intermediaries" – the interlocking celebrity and promotional industries made up of managers, agents, publicists, promoters, stylists who work behind the scenes to create narratives of stardom and promote celebrities for public consumption.

Here, we will define celebrity as a *mediated public persona*, to be differentiated from the actual, unmediated person who is almost always unknown to audiences. This recognizes the mediation of a personality's identity prior to reception by an audience and the importance of this process to contemporary celebrity. Thus, we suggest that the notion of celebrity is better understood as a way of perceiving famous individuals, a mediating frame (a "fame frame") than it is a formal delineation of their qualities.

THE LONG CULTURAL POLITICS OF FAME AND CELEBRITY

Debates over celebrity and cultural value are not as recent as many critics would have us believe. According to Leo Braudy (1997), fame in Western cultures prior to modernity was largely derived from either public office or heroic achievements. However this was beginning to alter by the turn of the nineteenth century. In Britain, for instance, the poet William Wordsworth recorded this sense of change in his Preface to the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads,* attacking what he saw as the "craving for extraordinary incident" evident in the metropolitan classes of England. He vividly observes that,

> . . . a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and, unfitting it for all voluntary exertion, to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor. The most effective of these causes are the great national events which are daily taking place, and the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies. (1800: 8)

For Wordsworth and his fellow Romanticists the mundane character of industrial urban life and the circulation of "idle and extravagant stories" contrasted negatively with the "great and permanent objects" of nature (1800: 8). He was identifying a trend for gossip and "extra-ordinary incident" that was to continue unabated, and during the nineteenth century the population explosion, rapid industrialization,

and consequential urbanization of Western societies had the effect of forming *media publics* – audiences united by an interest in consuming information about events of the day.

By the turn of the nineteenth century a new discourse of celebrity and fame had emerged that was less virtuous and more pragmatic. The graphic revolution introduced innovations such as the news press and the photograph, and with it came the widespread availability of print media such as newspapers and pamphlets that brought to public attention the exploits and visages of personalities in the public domain. This increased popular interest in the personalities and private lives of famous people as well as speculation over the possible identity of notorious individuals (a good example being the culprit of the "Jack the Ripper" murders in London in 1888). Thomas Carlyle, a Scottish philosopher and essayist, commented upon the qualities of heroism and heroic leadership in his book *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841), and compared different types of secular and religious heroes, including such diverse individuals (notable, not least, that they were all men) as Oliver Cromwell, William Shakespeare, Napoleon, and the Prophet Muhammad.

However it was during the nineteenth century that modern celebrity culture appeared. At this time an increasing quantity of journalism and biographies began to be published about writers and performers of stage, vaudeville, and music in the "penny press" in America and the emerging popular news press in Britain. These began to have the effect of expanding mass interest in the names and qualities of public individuals. Newspapers soon began to recognize the economic importance of celebrity, noting the increase in circulation achieved through articles about famous individuals. From this juncture, celebrity has been intimately connected with publicity and the mass media, demonstrated vividly in the mid nineteenth century by the American showman P.T. Barnum's skilful use of the news press to promote his circus and music performers.

One of the most systematic attempts by the media industries to capitalize on celebrity was by the Hollywood film studios. By the early twentieth century they realized that they could commodify the popularity of their recognizable players, bringing the performers fame and the studio's films publicity and larger audiences. In order to systematize this process the studios contracted rosters of stars to perform exclusively in their films in exchange for hitherto unimaginable salaries – what became known as the "star system." Richard deCordova (1990) identifies the emergence of public interest in "picture personalities," and the subsequent naming of performers on screen and in film studio publicity material, as crucial in the development of the Hollywood film industry, and a discourse on stardom itself. Such film stars were promoted by the studios as exotic and extraordinary figures, followed by audiences across the world (as movie star Humphrey Bogart reportedly once put it, "You're not a star until they can spell your name in Karachi"). Other media industries were quick to emulate these methods, if not

always with Hollywood's global reach. As cinema was joined by other media forms, so these developed similar hierarchies of star talent. By the middle of the twentieth century, television personalities had become celebrities in their own right, and film and rock/pop stars circulated across other media, bringing publicity to their projects and participating in the celebrity promotional strategies with which we have become so familiar – rounds of press junkets, talk shows, celebrity magazine profiles, public appearances and other platforms for their performances.

CRITICAL THEORY APPROACHES TO CELEBRITY

Celebrity is inextricably bound up with capitalist consumer culture and attempts to individualize cultural production. At the time when the emergence of the modern mass media was being felt, the cultural critics of the Frankfurt School argued that the production of celebrity worked to efface the standardized and alienated mode of production in mass culture. For instance Theodor Adorno maintained that:

> [the culture industry's] ideology above all makes use of the star system, borrowed from individualistic art and its commercial exploitation. The more dehumanised its methods of operation and content, the more diligently and successfully the culture industry propagates supposedly great personalities and operates with heart-throbs. (2003 [1975]: 26)

"Heart-throbs" and "supposedly great personalities," for such critics, appealed to our emotional rather than critical instincts, and he developed the concepts of "standardization" and "pseudo-individualization" to elaborate a theory of the culture industries and celebrity, as a form of ideological deception. For such critics the drive towards profit-maximization in cultural production was achieved in part through what we might call the processes of *celebritization*. Needing to reconcile the alienation between mass production and artistic endeavor, they contended that celebrities were ideal mediators of capitalism, eminently suitable as they exist in both the public and private spheres, identifiable as ordinary human individuals yet are also endowed with extraordinariness and fame.

Following Adorno, one of the most prescient of early writers on twentieth century celebrity was Daniel Boorstin, whose book, titled *The Image: a guide to pseudo-events in America* (1961) noted the increased prevalence of celebrity in American society and was widely read at the time. He argued that that the consequences of a rise in celebrity were a decline in those with "heroic" qualities. Terming the celebrity a "human pseudo-event" he offered a damning critique of the media's role in the creation of fame, presenting a (now well-known) definition of the celebrity as a tautology: an individual who is "well-known for their well-knownness" (Boorstin 1961: 57). Boorstin's book valuably anticipated the analysis of later writers, notably Guy Debord's (1983 [1967])

examination of the "society of the spectacle," and Baudrillard's (1994) concept of the "simulacra," as well as the more recent rise in celebrity-producing reality television. However, as Braudy's (1997) history of fame shows, oppositions made between deserved fame (renown) and inauthentic fame (celebrity) are, if nothing else, historically problematic, as the celebrity of notorious and unpopular figures in history attests.

Even if we do not accept the more pessimistic claims of the Frankfurt School and Boorstin, it is clear that the rise of the mass media reconfigured the nature of celebrity production and reception during the twentieth century and this process continues today, with the development of celebrity through new media forms such as Internet websites such as YouTube and blogs. Occasionally it is striking that these circumvent the usual gatekeeping processes, for example the reported rise of singer-songwriter Sandi Thom via webcast gigs from her home promoted via the social networking site MySpace. However, while it is possible for a celebrity to be produced and circulated in alternative media forms, it remains much more usual for such individuals to be rapidly subsumed within the mainstream media (Thom, for instance, was signed to a major record label soon after her Internet success).

In essence, our contemporary formation of fame still broadly depends on the circulation of a public persona by the media and promotional industries. Media exposure is the oxygen that sustains the contemporary celebrity. On the other hand, they are the means through which the media attempt to compete for audience share and product-differentiate content, increasingly important in the contemporary media environment characterized by diversity of choice and audience segmentation. Joshua Gamson's (1994) study of celebrity in America stresses the importance of this industrial manufacturing of the celebrity, noting that what he calls "celebrity making" is fundamentally a "commercial enterprise, made up of highly developed and institutionally linked professions and sub-industries such as public relations, entertainment law, celebrity journalism and photography, grooming and training, managing and agenting, novelty sales" (64). Yet the popular discourse on fame has long stressed the exceptionality of the individual and their unique qualities, rather than the industries that produce and manage this fame, and the media industries that rely upon it. The "exceptional talent" assumption is comprehensively challenged by many of the articles here, revealing how image management and the sub-industries that construct and sustain media celebrity are important areas for analysis.

THE "CELEBRITIZATION" OF MEDIA

If celebrity is fundamentally a product of the mass media age, over the last twenty years or so the media, promotional, and celebrity industries have only intensified their interdependencies. Celebrity coverage has now moved well beyond traditional entertainment formats into the domains of news and current affairs. Indeed politicians and journalists have often become entertainers themselves – witness their frequent

appearances on television chat or quiz shows, for example (see Higgins in this issue). This has led to debates about the personalization of politics and attracted criticism from those who see celebrities, rather than democratically elected politicians, acting as persuaders and conduits of public opinion. Politically active celebrities are now a commonplace part of contemporary politics, as demonstrated by the global campaigning against Third World poverty by rock stars Bono and Bob Geldof, the appointment as Governor of California of movie star Arnold Schwarzenegger and the endorsements of Hollywood celebrities for Barack Obama in his campaign for the American Presidency. For writers such as Bob Franklin (1997, 2004) the movement of celebrities into the domain of formal politics – as endorsers of political views or public persuaders – is troubling, replacing democratic forms of debate with managed "newszak" and "infotainment." For others they present one of the means through which – like it or not – modern political communication may be mediated, and voters engaged (Street 2002; Drake and Higgins 2006).

The prominence of celebrity in media representations raises questions of the symbolic power of celebrity culture in defining our sense of cultural identities – what we think of as glamorous, for instance, or fashionable, or cool, or sexy. In the media there exists a popular, but academically contested, media effects discourse about the "influence" of celebrities upon the public, especially upon children. An example was offered by a recent report from a large British teaching union, The Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL), which conducted a survey of 304 teachers on schoolchildren's attitudes to celebrity in the classroom (2008). According to their report, television is the most common source of celebrity information for schoolchildren (77%), followed by their peers (61%), the Internet (51%), and magazines (46%). Over 70% of teachers in their survey felt that celebrity culture influences their students' aspirations for the future, however most (74%) felt that this was both positive and negative, rather than the 24% who felt it was negative and the 2% who thought it was positive. In terms of aspiration, nearly 60% of pupils aspired to be a pop star or a sports star, while around a third aspired to be a film star, a model, or "anything as long as they are famous." When asked who their students felt they modeled themselves upon, the top overall answers were (in descending order of popularity) David Beckham, Victoria Beckham (Posh), Frank Lampard, Keira Knightly, David Tennant, Paris Hilton, Lewis Hamilton, Sugababes, and Leona Lewis. The success of the Harry Potter books and films meant that the actor Daniel Radcliffe was particularly popular among primary age children. David Beckham appears, according to this survey, to be popular among all ages of children and far more popular than the next (Victoria Beckham or Posh) at 53% against 30% (meaning that the Beckhams emerged in this survey as by far the most significant celebrities for the British children that were sampled).

Finding out that celebrities are popular with children in our contemporary media-saturated environment is hardly surprising. Less

certain is their "influence" or otherwise upon the attitudes and beliefs of these children. The survey suggests that celebrity culture has increased its influence upon schoolchildren, but the exact nature of this "influence" – if by influence we mean a demonstrable cause-effect relationship – is harder to discern. In the survey 44% of teachers reported that students tried to look like and/or behave like the celebrities they admire against 33% who reported that they did not, with the rest unsure. But copying does not, of course, equate to "influence," and the most frequent effects reported were on visual appearance (hairstyle, dress) and the use of celebrity catch-phrases and mannerisms, which may represent a more critical and knowing engagement with issues raised by celebrity culture than might be assumed from the headline of the report. The question of celebrity influence over attitudes and beliefs is almost impossible to prove as celebrity culture cannot be effectively isolated from culture itself. The essay by Helen Powell and Sylvie Prasad in this issue takes up such questions by examining the celebrity lifestyle expert acting as a cultural intermediary. While celebrity "influence" is clearly an issue that has long preoccupied commentators, little evidence yet exists to support claims of strong causal influence. Moral outrage voiced in the popular press about the behavior of celebrities as role-models is often predicated upon simplistic hypodermic transmission models of media effects, really reflecting the media's need for saleable stories (after all, celebrity sells).

Perhaps of equal concern is the misleading yet widespread discourse of fame as inherently democratic, perpetuated by the media, especially in recent reality television shows that have made "ordinary people" into celebrities. This plays upon the "ordinary/extraordinary" paradox outlined earlier. According to the ATL report, many pupils believe celebrity status is attainable by anyone, potentially diminishing the importance of their academic study and perpetuating the myth of celebrity status as the ultimate form of achievement. Yet we might also note how celebrities can bring issues into the public sphere for wider discussion. The brief imprisonment of celebrity and American socialite Paris Hilton for violating her probation gave rise to debates in the news media about whether rich celebrities were treated differently in the justice system to ordinary people. The media coverage over pop star Madonna's decision to adopt a Malawian baby led to significant debates over the ethics of adoption. The debates over global poverty brought by Bob Geldof and Bono, along with other celebrities, to the G8 World Summit in 2005, and the global Live8 concerts, showed how celebrities can use their fame to attract global attention to an important issue. The problem with discussions of celebrity "influence," then, is that it often involves framing the questions asked the wrong way round – instead of what influence do celebrities have on our media we might instead ask why the media are so fascinated by the forms of public subjectivity that celebrities perform for us.

CELEBRITY AND THE ACADEMY

Analysis of the celebrity/star phenomenon has been taken up more systematically by recent academic research. Richard Dyer's (1998 [1979]) study of film stardom had a particularly significant influence on subsequent work on screen stardom. Dyer's argument was that stars function as clusters of signs and signifying discourses that gave them particular meanings for audiences. Dyer drew particular attention to the function of film stars and suggested that they resolve ideological contradictions for audiences through naturalizing certain values and myths. In doing so, Dyer took seriously the pleasures that consuming celebrity images gives audiences. In this work, and that of others within film and, to a lesser extent, television studies at the time, celebrity and stardom presented a paradox: Hollywood stars offered the appeal of attainable, meritocratic fame and wealth, yet at the same time they were desirable for their idealized glamour and "otherness." For him the "star image" was not conceptualized exclusively in textual terms, but also related to external "texts": biographies, press articles, profiles, and the multitude of discourses constructed around celebrities in the public domain. This was seen as a mutually informing circuit of signification; an accumulating inter- and extra-textual star image that gained meaning through its relationship with audiences, and their negotiated readings of star signs.

Dyer's work led to a significant expansion in research into film stardom, in particular on the discursive structures that mediate stars/celebrities and issues of identification. However, much of the work within this tradition focuses upon celebrity consumption rather than production. Despite an early interest in stardom by sociologists, research remained lacking on the production of celebrity, particularly so within the political economy tradition. Thus while film and cultural studies have emphasized the important symbolic resources of celebrity, the economic grounds upon which celebrity is produced have only recently been given significant attention (Gamson 1994; Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000; Turner 2004). P. David Marshall, through the lens of political theory, argues that celebrity is a form of "rationalization" of the social domain, and "celebrates the potential of the individual and the mass's support of the individual in mass society" (1997: 43). For him a complex co-dependency develops between celebrities and their publics. Celebrity power depends upon audiences and the media's investment in the status and exceptional nature of celebrity. At the same time celebrities need to regulate and control the ownership of their images to maintain a monopoly power over themselves as individuated brands (Drake 2007).

In summary, academic writing on celebrity draws from a broad range of disciplines and considers a range of different media, as do our contributors here. However most approaches agree that although celebrity predates the rise in modern communication technologies, the mass media of the twentieth century facilitated a dramatic expansion of the sites and means in which famous individuals can be consumed

by audiences. The emergence of stardom in Hollywood cinema, for instance, demonstrated how the cinema was important not only to the expansion of celebrity at the start of the twentieth century, but also to a public discourse around stardom (deCordova 1990). Nuanced accounts of the phenomenon of celebrity from sociological, aesthetic, and cultural perspectives have begun to appear, including studies of celebrity in other fields such as sports and politics (Whannel 2002; see also the range of essays in Holmes and Redmond 2006). Research on audiences and fan culture has also extended consideration of celebrity through an examination of the varied forms of engagement that audiences have with celebrities in specific cultural contexts. For example, Jackie Stacey's (1994) study of postwar female cinema audiences in Britain suggests not only the escapism and pleasures that "star gazing" offered to British women during post-World War Two austerity, but also the captivating lure that the glamour of Hollywood stars symbolically held over their audiences as idealized images of femininity. The tension between these two positions – escapism and captivation – is at the very center of debates about the cultural politics of celebrity.

We hope that the articles gathered here offer a demonstration of the range of approaches that can be used to address celebrity, but that also they attend specifically to the cultural politics of celebrity. The articles started life as papers in an international conference that we organized on celebrity culture. This event aimed to encourage an interdisciplinary dialogue between scholars working on celebrity and stardom, enabling an interchange of ideas and approaches from across the humanities and social sciences. Presenters offered papers examining celebrity from a broad range of textual, industrial, and audience perspectives – truly an interdisciplinary event. While the research represented in this issue is, by necessity, both narrower and more specifically concerned with the cultural politics of celebrity, it too emphasizes how analysis of celebrity, fame, stardom, heroism, and renown cuts across different fields and is able to reflect a diversity of approaches, demonstrating that while the category "celebrity" may have a common idiomatic currency, the differences between celebrities and the varying forms of their public mediation matter a great deal.

To take such mattering seriously is, of course, also a key concern of cultural politics. To promote the conference we issued a press release which led to snowballing interest from which approximately forty media articles were produced, mainly in the form of printed press articles and interviews with presenters, but also a number of radio interviews from media as far afield as Australia and India. Our academic conference found itself at the center of unexpected media attention, attracting visiting journalists and a spread of media headlines ranging from straightforward reports of the event to misinformed opinion pieces, including one by journalist and former *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2001–) housemate Janet Street Porter (in the British *The Independent* newspaper) and perhaps our most lurid headline, in the largest

circulating British popular newspaper, *The Sun,* titled "Boffins discover the meaning of Becks" (September 13, 2005). Broadly speaking we might identify two frames that typified the journalists' articles. The first was structured around the high concept collision between high-brow academic "boffins" and low culture. These articles focused upon a small sample of the papers delivered, particularly an interest in, as *The Sun* article indicates, the English football star David Beckham. The second frame involved, in varying forms, attempting – like the ATL survey – to position the work from the conference within a media effects paradigm, asking whether celebrities might be good or bad role-models. This raised a similar difficulty found by Su Holmes (2005: 6) in her "bid for media 'fame'." The journalists clearly preferred a form of punditry rather than academic analysis. Despite the so-called "cultural turn" in the humanities and social sciences, and the significant increase in column inches written about popular culture, it appears that there remain, in short, some difficulties in developing a sustained public engagement via the media with issues relating to the politics of the popular as represented by celebrity culture.

RECONSIDERING CELEBRITY, REDEFINING THE POLITICAL

Our discussion of celebrity and its interlocking relationship with the media suggests that analyzing celebrity culture is a political issue. Granted, the power of individual celebrities is often fragile and ephemeral, but nonetheless celebrity culture as a system is a significant agent of power relations within contemporary culture, and the media celebrity offers a site for discussions about the power relationships between media producers and consumers, and their struggles over meaning. Celebrity often emerges as a mediating frame between a performer and their publics, as a key discourse informing cultural representations (such as gender, ethnicity, or class), and as an alliance between media and promotional industries. When all of these converge around a single and highly prominent news event then, momentarily, the celebrity narrative can become the absolute center – the vortex – of media attention. In his article in this volume Garry Whannel provides a development of his concept of "vortextuality," analyzing how the verdict of the trial of pop star Michael Jackson was reported in the news press, an analysis that might be extended to the coverage of his death in 2009. Whannel demonstrates how the relationship between celebrity, the news press, the promotional industries, and audiences involves a complex set of feedback loops. When a story gains "traction" then the acceleration and accumulation of media coverage can be startling, often only for it to subside equally rapidly.

In his article Whannel also notes how the British series of the reality television show *Celebrity Big Brother* offered some indication of the "potentially political" (Nash 2001: 90). This fifth series broadcast in 2007 featured Jade Goody, a celebrity initially made famous from appearing in (but not winning) the third series of the non-celebrity

version of *Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2002). Goody originally was the target of a negative press campaign to vote her out of the Big Brother house, and subsequently became a regular feature of celebrity magazines. Her 2007 appearance however became controversial when Goody and two fellow housemates made a number of bullying and racist comments to another contestant, Shilpa Shetty, a Bollywood film star. The British television regulator Ofcom received over 44,500 complaints from viewers and its Content Sanctions Committee produced a seventy-page report examining the issue. As a result the broadcaster, Channel 4, was sanctioned for breaches of the Broadcasting Code and forced to issue a public apology, while Goody was vilified in the popular press. Shetty went on to win and to gain numerous lucrative sponsorship contracts while Goody was attacked in the press, wept publicly in a television interview, and checked in to a rehabilitation clinic. The following year, attempting to revive her career by appearing in the Indian version of the program, *Bigg Boss* (Colors Viacom, 2006–)*,* she was informed on air that she had cervical cancer, propelling her back into the British media spotlight until her untimely death in 2009.

High profile cases involving celebrities therefore often ignite wider debates in popular culture. In the Goody/Shetty example the controversy opened up a broader public discussion about casual racism in British society and, later, public sympathy for her terminal cancer. Goody's cancer was reported to have led to a substantial increase in women going for cervical screenings, potentially preventing other early deaths.

The artwork by David Levine that follows presents head shots of wannabe celebrities in their bid for fame. Through a fascinating exploration of the process of unsolicited submission, his work reflects upon the gatekeeping processes that regulate contemporary celebrity. The aspirational desire for public recognition and fame gives rise to particular forms of performance – as shown in the ritualistic head shots or photographic poses, or in hopeful submissions to reality television or quiz shows. As he notes, the thirst for fame itself becomes a performance, both aspirational and exploitative, offering us a discourse about the individual and what constitutes cultural recognition in a world saturated by media celebrity. Unwanted wannabe celebrities, he suggests, might be thought of as "the Culture Industry's industrial waste," waste necessary to the process of fame production.

Earlier we discussed aspects of celebrity that involve incursion in the domain of politics. However this also applies to those prominent journalists and news anchors who interview politicians. In his article in this volume Michael Higgins advances the concept of "public inquisitor" to analyze well-known British journalists and presenters Jeremy Paxman and John Humphries and considers how they perform as media personalities. In so doing, Higgins suggests that a critical reappraisal is needed within political communication of such forms of celebrity, where prominent journalists draw discursively upon their celebrity status to bring politicians to account. Helen Powell and Sylvie Prasad extend the discussion of the political into an analysis of lifestyle

television and the celebrity expert. They argue that such celebrities act as cultural (and sometime political) intermediaries in the transmission and shaping of public taste – here the celebrity acts as public "taste-maker" or bearer of aesthetic knowledge. Their analysis demonstrates that power struggles over cultural meaning often privilege particular "middle-class" tastes at the expense of other social groups.

What all these articles and artwork share is a healthy, critical skepticism towards the hyperbole surrounding celebrity culture and its place within the media and promotional industries. In different ways they examine the important function of celebrity in significant debates – over issues such as public health or democratic politics, for instance – and consider how the bond between celebrities and audiences might characterize and perhaps even shape our mediated culture.

CONCLUSIONS

As we have seen, contemporary celebrity is associated with the rise of the mass media in the twentieth century and its creation, circulation, and promotion of well-known individuals. Although celebrity culture predates modern communication technologies, the dramatic rise of the mass media in the twentieth century facilitated a great expansion of the sites in which celebrity culture could be consumed by audiences. They are an inherent part of consumer capitalism, driven by the interlocking media and publicity industries.

Although celebrity is not a modern phenomenon, the articulation of contemporary celebrity with the media represents a distinct shift in the dynamics of fame. Celebrity might thus be best understood not as the property of an individual but as a mediating frame between famous individuals and their media publics. The relationship between celebrities and audiences has been usefully conceptualized as a para-social engagement, as it is primarily based upon a one-way flow of communication, although more recently in the case of reality television, feedback mechanisms (voting for or against a celebrity) are a popular reflexive device allowing audiences to play and interact within the boundaries of the format. Through such forms of interaction celebrities become more than simply famous, they become mediated friendships, giving rise to new forms of mediated intimacy – ranging from adoring and enchanted, to cynical and ironic – between celebrity performers and their publics.

In conclusion we contend that celebrity is not a phenomenon as easy to dismiss as its many critics would like us to believe. For better or worse, the ubiquity of celebrity culture means it is part of everyday life, and deeply embedded in the functioning of the contemporary media. As the examples of Goody, Jackson, Bono, and Geldof indicate, the publicity that celebrities command can act as a lightning rod for social anxieties, bringing public attention to potentially political issues. Celebrity narratives can sometimes set the news agenda, as Whannel argues, and if often only briefly, become the headline topic for everyday discussion, possibly to even form part of a mediated public sphere. For

good or ill, celebrity culture continues to be connected in complex ways to our sense of identity and belonging, of how we relate to the world, to each other and to ourselves. For these reasons we argue that the dynamics of our contemporary cultural settlement with celebrity are important to analyze.

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