

## Review

Su Holmes & Diane Negra (eds.), *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, Continuum, London 2011. ISBN 978-1-4411-5495-8. 339pp.

The academic study of celebrity culture has evolved rapidly since the publication of Ellis Cashmore's monograph, *Beckham* (2002) promoted a flurry of media angst in the early 2000s. Broadsheets, tabloids and the BBC weighed in on the matter, resulting in an entirely predictable series of apocalyptically pessimistic proclamations about cultural 'dumbing down', students graduating with degrees in 'David Beckham Studies' and – inevitably – the imminent demise of Higher Education in the UK as a result of an insidious film/media/cultural studies axis of evil. Over a decade on, however, and scholarly work on celebrity has become a lively and integral part of the academic scene, a state of affairs consolidated since 2010 by the emergence of the journal *Celebrity Studies* and its hugely popular bi-annual conference. As a result, *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity* joins an increasingly expansive body of work which includes such volumes as P. David Marshall's *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (1997), Graeme Turner's *Understanding Celebrity* (2013), Chris Rojek's *Celebrity* (2007) and *Fame Attack* (2012), as well as a number of notable edited collections: *Framing Celebrity: New Directions in Celebrity Culture* (2006), *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (2006) and *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (2007).

Starting with the editors' proposition that their collection seeks to 'highlight and interrogate what seem to be the stark differences in the contemporary treatment of male and female celebrities' (1), *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* 'represents an effort to gather together scholarship that assesses the complex and varied historical placement of the female celebrity' (3). The stress here on 'historical' is one of the collection's great strengths, and several of the most intriguing contributions to the collection (on, for example, female political celebrity, infamous 1920s criminals and nineteenth century style icon Lillie Langtry) perform invaluable work in rebutting the commonly held assumptions that 'celebrity culture' is a uniquely recent phenomenon or that celebrity itself is a phenomenon which begins with the birth of the cinematic star system. Elsewhere, essays on iconic public figures such as Mia Farrow, Hedy Lamarr, Bette Davis and Meryl Streep serve both as lively case studies and illustrative examples of the volume's structuring thesis: that

discourses surrounding specific female celebrities are a revealing litmus test for gender politics at any given socio-historical juncture.

Given the highly accelerated logics of the contemporary celebrity-sphere it is perhaps unsurprising that half of the essays gathered herein focus on female fame over the past 10-15 years. Even less surprising, perhaps, are the depressing conclusions the majority of the contributors come to about what female celebrity tells us about women's roles in postfeminist popular culture today. Joining Madonna and Jennifer Lopez as the two most written-about female stars of recent years, the collection includes two fascinating essays on the cultural palimpsest that is Britney Spears. Both Margaret Schwartz and Anna Watkins Fisher deem the various discourses surrounding Spears' dense celebrity text as indicative of the cultural unconscious of American culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Schwartz persuasively finds in Spears' involvement with the high-profile crotch-flashing fad of 2007 a misogynist disavowal of the procreative functions of the female body and, by extension, the cultural reduction of women's genitalia to little more than a pornographically commodified prosthesis. Watkins Fisher, meanwhile, reads the collective fascination with Spears' faltering star image as a potent national metaphor for post-9/11 angst and 'America's failing promise of freedom for all during the Bush years' (330). Elsewhere, Caitlin Yunuen Lewis offers a deft reading of the construction of Hollywood 'indie' *auteur* Sofia Coppola's celebrity-text through the critical lenses of gender, age, ethnicity and class, while Emma Bell provides an insightful overview of the various ways in which mental illness is repeatedly mobilised as a trope of postfeminist transformation and self-actualization in celebrity autobiographies. While conceding that such narratives may assist in heightening awareness of mental ill health, Bell concludes that 'bad girl' personae such as Geri Halliwell, Gail Porter and Kerry Katona ultimately pay a cheapened price for their lucrative notoriety, often taking the full wrath of a postfeminist 'backlash' in both tabloids and would-be liberal broadsheets alike.

For all its obvious strengths, *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* offers slim pickings for anyone interested in audience and reception studies. Indeed, even the most well-researched essays frequently offer sweepingly negative assertions about the automatically interpellative allure of postfeminist celebrity culture. For example, Alice Leppert and Julie Wilson's detailed and otherwise persuasive analysis of successful reality TV star Lauren Conrad is undermined by their unequivocal critical insistence that her fans are always already duped and happily reified by Conrad's cross-media immersive appeal. An honourable exception to this general rule is Kim Allen's intelligently nuanced and empathetic chapter on class and young women's attitude(s) towards female celebrities. Tellingly, Allen concludes her contribution with a passionate avowal of audience research as a critical necessity in the study of contemporary celebrity. 'Celebrity cannot be understood only through looking at texts and images,' she asserts. 'It is a social practice and its meanings are never fixed but always negotiated [and] ... it is not just worthwhile but essential that empirical work looks not only to the active and resistant readings of the celebrity audience, but attends equally to the regulatory and disciplinary nature of celebrity discourse' (170).

*In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* has rightly been promoted as the first anthology which focuses specifically on the ideological function of the gendering of fame, and to this end it succeeds as a focussed and critically astute addition to the field. The problem the book faces, of course, is the same one which afflicts all writing on contemporary celebrity. In an age of hyper-accelerated neo-fame it is almost impossible for scholarly analysis to keep pace with the unending barrage of prurient surveillance, moral panic, media bombast and Twitter-inflected hysteria which surrounds female celebrities. In the few days I have been writing this review, for example, prurient (and often transparently misogynistic) stories about female personae such as Amanda Knox, Rebekah Brooks, Kate McCann, Courtney Love and Nigella Lawson have continued to ebb and flow in the fickle tide of the cultural consciousness, rising to an omnipresent peak before once more disappearing into the celebrity ether. To take a case in point: the Miley Cyrus 'twerking' scandal of late 2013 already feels like ancient history; the event itself was rapidly (and problematically) critiqued in the promotional video for Lily Allen's single *Hard Out Here* long before academic commentary could possibly appear in print. (Indeed, I confess I had almost forgotten about both Britney's shaven pudenda and Geri Halliwell's anorexia prior to picking up this collection.) Scholarly work needs this kind of temporal (and critical) distance, of course, but in the demanding and aggressively perpetual NOW! of celebrity culture, there is always a nagging sense of academic commentary having somehow missed the boat. Nonetheless, *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* is a valuable and much-needed intervention in the burgeoning field of celebrity studies. Its many insights and often impeccable scholarship are only tempered by its bleak prognosis of a celebrity culture which continues to forcibly put the blame on mame.

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