

❖ **Holmes, Su and Redmond, Sean (Editors) - *Celebrity Studies*,  
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CELEBRITY studies isn't "bullshit", it's about "stuff" that matters.<sup>1</sup> That's the directive from the University of Queensland's Professor of Cultural Studies, Graeme Turner, who in a recent interview with *The Australian* newspaper, said that academics who write about celebrity should be prepared to defend their work against those who denounce its scholarly value. As he goes on to say, "[i]f you tell people you're writing a book on celebrity, and I've written two, you have to be ready to say: Look, this isn't bullshit, this is stuff that actually is happening now."<sup>2</sup>

Turner was speaking to journalist Bernard Lane in June 2010 in response to the March launch of *Celebrity Studies*, the first academic journal dedicated to the study of celebrity and its resultant cultures. Published by Routledge and co-edited by Su Holmes (University of East Anglia) and Sean Redmond (Victoria University of Wellington), the journal's arrival marks something of a rare moment in the media landscape. In Australia it's not often that academic pursuits reach the mainstream press.

And yet reading the article alongside Holmes' and Redmond's inaugural editorial, one gets the sense that Turner's "it isn't bullshit" defence isn't levelled at other academics. Rather, it's at members of the popular press who, despite – or perhaps because of – their rabid consumption and participation in the production of celebrity culture, have largely admonished the academy for its interest. Indeed, as Holmes and Redmond report, when news of the journal broke, it drew the ire of "shock-jocks in Sydney and *Daily Tribune* reporters in Tennessee". In the UK, meanwhile, Matthew Bell, a journalist for the *Independent*, was so troubled by the promised arrival of *Celebrity Studies* that he penned an op-ed masquerading as news to query whether we "really need academics to explain our obsession with fame."<sup>3</sup> Taking his lead from the biographer and cultural commentator Graham McCann, who is quoted as saying that "academic findings of this sort are at best banal and at worst misleading", Bell forecasts that "we can expect plenty of pseudo-academic mumbo jumbo" from the journal.<sup>4</sup>

But far from fulfilling this prophesy, the first two issues of *Celebrity Studies* – both published in 2010 – feature a sophisticated, and altogether very readable, collection of essays that make a compelling claim for both the presence and future of this field of scholarship. In the launch issue (vol 1, issue 1) – the focus of this review – Holmes and Redmond make a strong case for celebrity scholarship while crisply taking Bell (and others like him) to task. "In the media's bludgeoning of the idea for the journal," they write, "we knew that the critical worth of

*Celebrity Studies* was being proven. We understood that the very notion of a scholarly celebrity journal and of academics studying the impact of celebrity culture on everyday life was touching a raw nerve at the symbolic centre of celebrity production" (1).

Certainly one might argue that the media's tendency to dismiss the legitimacy of 'studying celebrity' is something of a duplicitous cause given the feverish contribution the media makes to the discipline in the first place. Indeed, one of the chief aims of *Celebrity Studies* is to de-familiarise the turned-everyday currencies of celebrity culture (the kind evoked by Bell et al), with its associated mass-media obsessions and addictions, by examining what Holmes and Redmond describe as the media's "centrality to meaning-making and idea formation in the modern world". In doing so the editors seek to problematise the overwhelming passivity that underpins media responses to the proliferation of celebrity – that old adage of 'it's what the market wants' – to query the cultural and economic logic and power behind the organisational structures that manufacture and maintain the game of fame in the first place. "Celebrity", they argue, "is key to the way the social world organises and commodifies its representations, discourses and ideologies, sensations, impressions and fantasies" (1).

Figured in this way, *Celebrity Studies* stakes its claim then, in exploring the representation, consumption and circulation of mediated personalities, and the contemporary and historical contexts of fame and stardom, while concurrently offering a critical platform from which to debate the ontological status of celebrity itself. The first issue is comprised of invited contributions only and includes essays from scholars such as Turner, Jacob Smith, P. David Marshall, James Bennett and Chris Holmlund who variously focus on subjects such as a nineteenth-century bridge-jumper, the ageing Jackie Chan and, of course, the other-worldly aura of Barack Obama. In choosing the contributors, Holmes and Redmond sought to initiate a conversation around the variances in the cultural and contextual permutations of contemporary celebrity from both local and global, and theoretical and conceptual standpoints. In short, the first issue serves as a "what, why, how and where of celebrity culture today" (8).

In this way, opening with Turner's essay, 'Approaching celebrity studies', is a strategic move, one that ensures the longevity of that conversation as well as the journal's preparedness to tackle, head-on, the kinds of contemporary cultural criticisms levelled at the discipline itself. Following a crisp and concise summation of the key debates in celebrity scholarship – ranging from semiotic representational analyses to reading celebrity through industrialised economic models to sociological accounts of its cultural and social function – Turner moves to ask what it is that academics actually want from the study of celebrity? Noting its textual richness and the lure of glittering appeal for cultural studies theorists in particular, Turner asks how can the academy ensure that it too doesn't succumb to the very same star-powered 'fetishisation' that it seeks to critique?

The response is a convincing and provocative call to arms. After pinpointing the gaps and elisions in the discipline, Turner argues that celebrity studies needs to direct its interest to two key areas. The first lies with industrial production and audience consumption. The interest here is in transnational convergence: it's in the "structural effect of celebrity upon production in the globalising media and entertainment industries" and in the industries that produce and promote the commodity and power-driven discourses attached to celebrity production, namely the media and its networked allies, the public relations machine and advertisers (15). The second area – the one Turner claims is the more difficult – concerns the cultural and social formation of celebrity, namely "the connections between the consumption of media products and their cultural and social effects". For Turner, the key interest here is in the way celebrity produces and contributes to discourses of selfhood and broader generative shifts in behaviour and culture.

One of the emergent trends to arise out of this second concern must surely be the spectacle of the self-produced celebrity, most commonly seen in reality TV and in stunts like the one enacted by Australian woman, Clare Werbeloff, the 'chk-chk boom girl', who became an internet sensation after falsely claiming to have witnessed a shooting. In vol 1, issue 1, both Jacob Smith and P. David Marshall pick up on this phenomenon, and on the thematics marked out by Turner, but in markedly different ways. Marshall looks at the role of new media in the re-packing and re-presentation of what I might call 'ordinary selves', principally through social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*, while Smith examines the politics of celebrity self-creation through the lens of the nineteenth century "spectacle stunt", focusing primarily on Steve Brodie's 1886 jump from the Brooklyn Bridge – an event that generated widespread interest from both newspapers and amusement forums.

Smith takes a decidedly Marxist approach to his study that includes an interesting argument about the role of class in celebrity stunts. In vol 1, issue 2, meanwhile, Misha Kavka and Amy West take "spectacle studies" into the 21st century with a keenly acute analysis of the very public death of the notorious British reality TV star, Jane Goody, who lived her final weeks under the lens of the media.

Other essays in vol 1, issue 1 include an important study into the way emotion functions and plays out in the production of celebrity, particularly with regard to manifestations of intimacy in developing bonds of attachment between particular identities and the audiences who follow them (Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi). In their essay, "The 'place' of television in celebrity studies", meanwhile, James Bennett and Su Holmes consider the role of television in the production, circulation and consumption of celebrity – a particularly relevant theme given the journal's likely continuing interest in reality TV. Bennett and Holmes elegantly argue that the kind of fame produced by television has historically been marginalised by film, which they suggest leaves contemporary scholars with an exciting opportunity to develop an arresting set of critical studies. Chris Holmlund's essay, "Celebrity, ageing and Jackie Chan," previews a forthcoming special issue of *Celebrity Studies* on ageing with an eminently fascinating look into representations of middle-aged, Asian, male celebrities, notably Jackie Chan. Given that most studies on ageing and celebrity have tended to focus on white women (and occasionally white men), Holmlund's essay represents an important essay into issues of ageing, race and masculinity, and the diminished representation of ageing Asian men on screen.

And, of course, no collection would be complete without a study of the 21st century's political Peintre celebre, Barack Obama. Sean Redmond's essay, "Avatar Obama in the age of liquid celebrity", investigates the inherently seductive power of the Obama shimmer, of the man who, in Redmond's words, has come to represent the embodiment of "the American success myth, 'global' prophet of the adoring masses and multi-media auratic figure ... the leading illustration of what is the expanded nexus of celebrity, spectacle and politics" (81). Yet the essay is more than an extension of the kind of aura-driven analysis afforded to clans such as the Kennedys. In a return to Nunn and Biressi's earlier essay on the power of affect in celebrity production, Redmond draws on Zygmund Bauman's work on the relationship between contemporary feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement within the nation state, to show how this can lead to a need for an "imagined and affective communion" (82). This, he claims, is found in a figure like Obama who is defined by a "promise of deliverance", but who – through the liquidity of his "star power" – fails to properly propagate this desire for "communion beyond triumphant specularism" (82). For some the jury may still be out on this one, while for others this may have been evident even before Obama's election, but in any case Redmond's essay does point to a new kind of politics performed by the Obama family.

Other sections of the journal are also rewarding. Each issue features a forum section, edited by James Bennett, which is devoted to shorter essays, observations and debates. Issue 1 is a

mixed selection of pithy appraisals on subjects such as the 'ordinary' female celebrity and, yes, Obama, while issue 2 includes an excellent series of essays on the death of Michael Jackson (continuing that spectacle theme). There's also a short book review section which canvases recent studies in the field.

Given that both the public and the media's obsession with fame isn't likely to go anywhere soon, and the pervasive and often unquestioning influence of celebrity in making and building our culture, *Celebrity Studies* is both timely and critical. Convergent and transnational media and communications are changing the nature of celebrity – fast – and with it, come changes in the values and behaviours of communities. Reality TV and spectacle culture, in conjunction with the opportunities afforded by social networking, has collaboratively altered what celebrity and fame means, and who can and should have access to it.

The effects of this are increasingly being felt across the world. Future planned issues of *Celebrity Studies* will look at female celebrity and aging, and celebrity in the global world – the latter of which is particularly needed. If the journal continues to widen its reach in this fashion, particularly with essays such as Holmlund's on Chan, then it will assuredly offer important insights into the ever-expanding global networks of the famous and the infamous.

The first issue of *Celebrity Studies* was published in March. The second issue is available now.

1 Professor Graeme Turner interviewed by Bernard Lane in 'Celebrity goss morphs into cultural study', *The Australian*, June 9, 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/celebrity-goss-morphs-into-cultural-study/story-e6frgcjx-1225877161571>, accessed 2 September, 2010

2 *ibid*

3 Matthew Bell, *Celebrity*, 'Celebrity, the cerebral and articles you won't see in 'Heat'', November 16, 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/media/press/celebrity-the-cerebral-and-articles-you-wont-see-in-heat-1020268.html>, accessed 2 September, 2010

4 *ibid*

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