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Celebrity : capitalism and the making of fame

Reference:

Van den Bulck Hilde.- Celebrity : capitalism and the making of fame
Communications : the European journal of communication research - ISSN 0341-2059 - Berlin, De gruyter mouton, 42:4(2017), p. 503-505
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMMUN-2017-0042>
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1473920151162165141>

Milly Williamson (2016) *Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame*. Cambridge: Polity, 189 pp. ISBN-13: 978-0-7456-4105(pb)

With ‘Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame’, Milly Williamson – senior lecturer in Film and Television Studies at Brunel University – provides a much-needed contribution to the sprawling field of celebrity studies. The book, according to Williamson, has two linked purposes: ‘to ask under what [economic] circumstances celebrity grows and spreads’, and ‘to examine the role of celebrity in the development of the media industries at key moments and in key sectors’ (p 21). To this end, the opening chapter: ‘What is Celebrity: The Changing Character of Fame’ positions the book in the wide range of potential approaches to celebrity, by carving out a distinct, political economic perspective. As such, it considers celebrity as the result of economic structures and processes rather than cultural developments. Such a perspective, in the views of Williamson, results in an understanding and evaluation of celebrity as an instrument of economic pressures rather than a phenomenon in its own right. It looks at celebrity in relationship to commodity fetishism, at celebrity’s position in the relationship between exchange value and use value, and at its relationship to individualism. Furthermore, the chapter explains the need for an historical perspective that goes back to the roots of contemporary celebrity. In doing so, the author emphasizes that she wishes to overturn the idea that celebrity is an answer to popular tastes and to what the audience wants but, instead, is the result of commercial pressures and industry dynamics.

The next chapters discuss crucial developments of celebrity in various time periods and media. The chapter ‘Celebrity and the Theatre: Modernity and Commercial Culture’ provides a fascinating insight into the birth of contemporary celebrity and how it is part and parcel of economic developments in late 18th century British theatre with an impact in the US and

beyond. It shows how the original repertoire theatre, that relied on a group of many prominent actors, evolved into a system with one ‘star’ as a result of competition in the commercial Georgian theatre. Furthest removed from the typical focus of media scholars on newspapers, radio, television, film and, recently, social media, the chapter illustrates that looking beyond these media, in this case by including theatre, can provide valuable insights.

The subsequent chapter ‘Celebrity and the Industrialization of Cultural Production’ looks at how the early mass press at the end of the 19th century evolved from providing a mix of radical politics and human interest to a focus on celebrity antics. It demonstrates that this was not the result of popular tastes but, first and foremost, of an effort to sustain advertising revenues. It further explains how this period saw the development of key conventions of celebrity journalism that persist until today. Early cinema, in turn, is analyzed as moving from documentary and journalism, popular with audiences, to narrative fiction in an attempt to make the production process more reliable and predictable, using actors’ famous faces as a means of market differentiation and appeal.

Next, in ‘Celebrity and News’, the author returns to celebrity journalism. She interprets the exponential growth of celebrity in news media in the late 1990s and 2000s as a means to lure audiences for advertisers, pointing to the influence of digitization and the accompanying development of the internet, news platforms and the cut throat competition for advertising revenue that came with it. While this is a more familiar analysis to most contemporary students of celebrity culture, the thoroughness of the analysis provides a new understanding of its economics.

The chapter on ‘Ordinary Celebrity’, subsequently, provides complementary insights into the much-studied phenomenon of reality television and of the creation of celeboids and ordinary people as celebrities by, again, focusing on the economic structures and processes that underlie this trend. In doing so, the author questions the democratic ‘force’ that is sometimes attributed to the rise of ordinary celebrities. Conversely, the chapter on ‘Social media and Celebrity: The Internet of “Self”’ focuses not on how ordinary people manage to become part of the world of celebrity but how celebrity has become part of ordinary people’s lives, as the machinations and marketing techniques of celebrity can be seen to dominate our identity politics on social media such as Facebook.

I genuinely enjoyed reading this book as I agree with the need to emphasize the economics and industrial forces behind (the development towards) an omnipresent celebrity culture. The author demonstrates that she has a firm grasp of political economic thinking and a knack to bring this framework to bear in the study of celebrity. This is not unique, as references to other authors such as Turner confirm, but the depth of analysis across time and types of cultural industries is quite unusual. The historical perspective is a further strong point of the book. The author not only demonstrates an understanding of earlier periods’ development of celebrity in its media economical context, she also refers to wider developments (e.g. railroad) that help to get the ‘whole’ picture. The author furthermore goes beyond contemporary categorization of media and culture by including theatre, next to legacy and social media. At the same time, it was somewhat disappointing that the book leaves a considerable gap, jumping from early cinema to contemporary television, in between only paying attention to celebrity news evolutions. As such, an analysis of the specific development of celebrity in early linear public and commercial television is reduced to a

quick and incomplete summary in the chapter that focuses on the contemporary trend of ordinary people as celebrity.

The main shortcoming of the book, in my view, is a certain disdain for other traditions and interpretations of the celebrity phenomenon. This is not so much a matter of negating but of actively dismissing alternative views to the point where it felt a little doctrinaire. For instance, in the chapter on celebrity and news, interpretations of celebrity as providing audiences with pleasure and of active audiences producing alternative readings of (and thus a level of resistance to) celebrity gossip are condemned and somewhat belittled as showing ‘limited awareness’ (p 86) of economic contexts. Dubied and Hanitzsch’ (2014) argumentation why celebrity news deserves recognition as part of journalism is set aside for being based on ‘assumptions’ that need to be ‘unpicked’. Similarly, in the chapter on social media, the author refers to Jenkins (2008) and Jenkins & Ford’s (2013) interpretation of consumer power as little more than an attempt to ‘reiterate a central corporate myth’ (p 151). In each case, the author uses a rhetorical device that does not question or criticizes but simply discards alternative interpretations of celebrity culture. The motives for doing so may be strong: to emphasize the idea that celebrity is not part of a popular democratization movement but, quite on the opposite, of a move towards ‘the curtailment of working-class culture and working-class participation in the cultural arena’ (p. 156), a trend that is not changed but strengthened by contemporary moves to ‘ordinary celebrities’. However, it leads to the impression that other views can be discarded simply as ‘wrong’ rather than alternative or complementary. The downside of such an attitude towards other traditions is that the book is itself at the risk of being disregarded by those coming from those alternative corners of research. This would be a shame, as the book is a timely and necessary addition to existing work on celebrity culture and celebrity industry.

Dubied, A. & Hanitzsch, T. (2014) Studying celebrity news. *Journalism, Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 15 (2): 137-43.

Jenkins, H. (2008) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York, N.Y: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. & Ford, S. (2013) *Spreadable Media*. New York, N.Y.: New York University Press.

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