Re-examining Stardom: Questions of Texts, Bodies and Performance

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[...]

Defining stars

Definitions of stars in film studies have emphasised that the concept of stardom is sustained by a contrast between the performing presence and what happens ‘off-stage’. Dyer writes of stars having ‘an existence in the world independent of their screen’ ‘fiction’ appearances (1979: 22) and describes stardom as ‘an image of the ways stars live’ (1979: 30). Allen and Conolly talk of a duality between actor and character and, citing Edgar Morin, refer to stars as ‘actors “with biographies”’ (1985: 172), whereas Tasker in her work on New Hollywood describes stars as ‘complex personas made up of far more than the texts in which they appear’ (1993: 74).

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The contrast between the public and private, the ordinary and the extraordinary is made available through a wide range of texts which goes well beyond the films into the newspapers, fan magazines, television shows and exchanges of information and rumour between fans. Dyer’s influential notion of the structured polymorphous of the star image (1979: 3) drew attention to this wide range of source material and emphasised the contradictory ideals which stars embody. Dyer identified ‘multiple but finite meanings’ (1979: 72, my emphasis) but later commentators have concentrated on the instability of star images. Judith Mayne is typical in arguing that ‘inconsistency, change and fluctuation are characteristic of star images’ (1993: 128) and suggests that the very appeal of stardom is based on ‘constant reinvention, the dissolution of contraries, the embrace of widely opposing terms’ (1993: 136). The emphasis on instability has been particularly strong because stars in film studies have been strongly associated with questions of identity — ‘being interested in stars is being interested in how we are human now’ (Dyer, 1987: 17). Psychoanalytic theory, influential in film studies, has emphasised the instability of the subject and the contradictory nature of identity. Links with cultural studies have also contributed to this sense of instability and resistance, emphasising the role of fans in making different and contested meanings.

Rethinking the categories

In thinking about how film stardom now operates in popular US cinema in particular, we need to unpack this model of stardom and look at the different ways in which meaning is made through a star. In this section, I want to look at other categories — celebrity/professional/performer — which also contribute to a paradigm of the different ways in which well-known individuals appear in the media and to suggest that these distinctions better help us to understand what film stars have in common with and how they differ from other mass media public figures.

The term celebrity indicates someone whose fame rests overwhelmingly on what happens outside the sphere of their work and who is famous for having a lifestyle. The celebrity is thus constructed through gossip, press and television reports, magazine articles and public relations.

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Celebrities may be contrasted to ‘professionals’. These are people whose fame rests on their work in such a way that there is very little sense of a private life and the emphasis is on the seamlessness of the public persona. In television, this kind of consistency has been associated with Langer with television’s personalities which ‘exist as more or less stable “identities” within the flow of events, situations and narratives’ (1981: 357). This consistency is evident with newsreaders, journalists, chat-show hosts and sports commentators who are particularly associated with modes of direct address to the audience. It can also be seen in fictional shows which depend on the regular appearance of recognisable fictional characters so that the actor is hidden behind the character and recognised only through that association. Regular soap and situation comedy actors would fall into this category since their fame depends on particular professional roles.
The professional lacks the double image of the star though, as the case of Rosanne illustrates, how the move can be made to star status when a 'biography' is brought to the audience's attention.

The third category, that of performance, is also associated with work and the public element of the star duality rather than the private life of the celebrity. In this category though, unlike that of the professional, skills and performance elements are not hidden but drawn attention to and the emphasis is on the showcasing or demonstration of skills. Tasker, in her work on action films, contrasts performers such as Chuck Norris and Claude Van Damme to stars, suggesting that the performer is characterised by the focus on particular skills such as martial arts which are showcased by the text (1995: 74).

In this context, certain kinds of actors can be seen as performers whose acting skills are showcased in theatre, film and television. The actor as a performer is defined by work and is often associated with the high cultural values of theatrical performance, even when that performance takes place in film or television.

Film stardom then has to be seen in the context of the drive in the media to create and exploit the status of being famous across the whole range of entertainment formats. Film, a medium in its own right, becomes also a site to be mined by other media. But cinema is a relatively inefficient way of delivering fame compared with some other formats. Cinema is slow to produce new products and while this can generate a sense of anticipation ('Batman is back') and huge audiences for the first weekend's screening the gaps between films for individual stars can be very long. Committed fans may be happy to re-view during the absence but the more regular appearances of those from spheres such as television, music or sports makes them more available to function as stars whether as pin-ups in teen magazines or as recognisable figures in press stories. I want to suggest that, in this situation, the emphasis on the polysemic of film star as a site of resistance can no longer, if it ever could, account for the variety of ways in which film stars function. In a situation of intense competition for the extratextual attention of the media, there are choices, for audiences and stars, about whether to exploit the full range of mass media exposure or to establish pleasures around stardom which are specifically related to the film text and to cinema. It is these questions I wish to explore through an examination of the way in which film stars can be analysed through the categories I have outlined here.

**Star-as-celebrity**

The dual nature of film stardom continues to be important but in certain contexts the emphasis is almost entirely on 'biography' or the celebrity element of stardom. Films stars share this terrain with others from sport, television, fashion and music, and the material found in the press, in particular, emphasises not the work but the leisure and private life of the star. This is the area where the intertextuality may be most important since knowledge of the star's 'real' life is pieced together from gossip columns and celebrity interviews, establishing a range of discourses in which the star features. In the discourse of celebrity, film stars literally interact with those from other areas. Thus, our knowledge that Johnny Depp goes out with the model Kate Moss is in the same register as the news of footballer David Beckham marrying a Spice Girl. For young fans, in particular, the celebrity mode may be the most accessible way into film stardom precisely because it links together different entertainment formats – magazines, videos, photography, film – and reworks distant film stars into the boyfriend of the girl next door; the teenage magazine Sugar (Issue 32, June 1997) remarked that Gwyneth Paltrow was 'as nervous as the rest of us' at having her long hair cut. 'Only difference is, she had Brad to sit in the salon, reassuringly holding her mirror throughout her hideous ordeal!'

This emphasis on the private sphere and the interaction with other forms of fame means that in the celebrity mode the films are relatively unimportant and a star can continue to command attention as a celebrity despite failures at the box office. For Julia Roberts and Richard Gere, for instance, the balance of their star constructions shifted away in the 1990s from their relatively unsuccessful films to the complications of their personal lives. In such circumstances, the dual nature of the star construction has diminished and the balance has shifted towards that of the celebrity where there is no work to back up the emphasis on the private life. In this construction of the celebrity, it no longer makes sense to see this circulation of information and images as subsidiary or secondary to the films or indeed to see cinema as different from other entertainment arenas. It is the audience's access to and celebration of intimate information from a variety of texts and sources which are important here.

**Star-as-professional**

By contrast, the other categories of stardom construct a rather different relationship between star and audience, one which is based much more substantially on the film text. In these categories – the star-as-professional and the star-as-performer – it is quite possible to understand and enjoy the meaning of the star without the intertextual knowledge which the star-as-celebrity relies on.

The star-as-professional makes sense through the combination of a particular star image with a particular film context. It arises when we watch and check 'whether an actor's presence in a film is consistent with his or her professional role' (Narraway, 1990: 262) and involves the star's identification with a particular genre. Thus, certain stars such as Steve Martin, Eddie Murphy and Jim Carrey are linked to certain forms of comedy whereas the stars whom Tasker bases her analysis of on Stallone, Schwarzenegger and Van Damme are associated with quite precise variations of the action film and displays of masculine prowess.

I would suggest that for the star-as-professional a stable star image itself is of crucial importance. Too much difference from established star image may lead to disappointment for the intended audience. Stallone offers an interesting example of the difficulties facing a professional star who wants to change. In her study of action heroes such as Stallone, Tasker emphasises the instability of stardom, arguing that the 'truth' of a star is tied to identity which is never secure (1993: 76) and that stars work by creating space for contradictory and ambiguous identifications in the audience. She suggests that a star such as Schwarzenegger managed to work on this instability by introducing an element of comedy, thus effecting a change in image away from bodybuilding and a shift into mainstream work. But Tasker also cites the example of Stallone whose star image embodies the immigrant who achieves success in the face of the establishment. Films such as Rocky (1976) and First Blood (1982) crucially conflated fictional narratives and the story of the actor so that certain themes – 'rags to riches',...
television personality and the cinema star as Langer does in suggesting that in cinema ‘the star absorbs the identity of the film character’ whereas on television it is the characters who are the ‘memorable identities’ (1981: 359). I am suggesting instead that film stars such as Ford, who work within the star-as-professional category, operate for cinema/video in the same way as a character in a television series, providing the pleasures of stability and repetition and the guarantee of consistency in the apparent plethora of choice offered by the expanding media.

Star-as-performer

This emphasis on a consistent persona underlines the claim to the uniqueness of the star-as-professional but, because of the emphasis on ‘being’ rather than acting, little attention is paid to the work done unless it be to the difficulties of filming hazardous action sequences. In this final category, though, attention is deliberately drawn to the work of acting so that, in a reversal of the celebrity category, it is performance and work which are emphasised, not life and the private sphere. This has always been a factor for certain, often theatrically based, stars, but I would suggest that It now takes on particular importance as a way for film stars to claim legitimate space in the overcrowded world of celebrity status. The expansion of the celebrity sphere means that film stars no longer dominate that arena and indeed the fact that soap stars and pop musicians can gain such celebrity may precisely, as Allen and Gomery note, have developed the process. As a response to this there has been quite a pronounced shift towards performance as a mark of stardom and the concept of star-as-performer has become a re-establishing film-star status through a route which makes its claim through the film text rather than appearances in the newspapers. Method acting, in particular, claims cultural status by making the celebrity trappings part of the detritus which has to be discarded if the performance is to be understood; Naremore comments that De Niro, ‘since becoming a famous actor, has avoided tacky celebrity interviews’ (1980: 280).

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This anxiety about the possibilities of acting in cinema has been reinforced in the 1980s and 1990s by the emphasis on blockbusters, special effects and computer graphics. Outside the cinema, stars compete for celebrity status with the glitzers of other fields; inside, they have to contend with dinosaurs, twistery and animated rabbits.

In this situation, acting has become a way of claiming back the cinema for human stars and it is not accidental that method acting has become so strongly associated with certain modes of film stardom. Colin Couzyn describes the method as ‘a pre-eminently realistic style of acting’ (1996: 53) and outlines the key signs of the method as ‘a new ease or “naturalness” on-stage’ (1996: 54); an increased emphasis on the significance of a character’s inner life and the signs by which it could be deduced; a heightened emotionalism’ (1996: 54) which is expressed in intense outbursts of expression; and ‘an underlying vision of the individual as divided between an “authentic” inner and a potentially repressed/repressive outer self’ (1996: 63).
The significance of method acting for concepts of film stardom has been recognised. Both Dyer and King discuss method acting as a particularly important feature of Hollywood cinema. Geduld, in her discussion of melodrama and stars, draws attention to the way in which the method actor 'embodies conflicts' and suggests that this emphasis on the bodily manifestation of moral dilemmas makes 'the Method...the contemporary performance mode most able to deliver "presence"'. Dyer, 1991b: 224. The emphasis on the body, the promise that every gesture and grimace carries meaning in terms of character if not of narrative, the inarticulate speech which the audience has to strain for, the moments of stillness and silence where action might be anticipated - these are signs of performance which audiences now expect and understand.

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I am not suggesting that cinema audiences now recognise 'the Method' by name but that they do recognise modes of performing in ways which have implications for understanding how some stars (not all of whom can be directly associated with the Method) make meaning. As Leslie Stern suggests in her extremely interesting account, De Niro is not 'narrowly Method' (1995: 209) and he appears 'to relish the very game of performance' (1995: 210): it is this method-related emphasis on performance which is apparent in the work of a number of male stars.

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This emphasis on performance works well, in fact, for the ageing star since it has the added merit of valuing experience and allowing a career to continue well beyond the pin-up stage. Method acting directs attention to the body of the star but shifts it away from the body as spectacle (the way in which Ford and Stallone move, for instance) to the body as site of performance, worked over by the actor. In a quite conscious way, the audience is invited to recognise and admire what the actor is doing with his face and body. The revival of Al Pacino's career and the continuance of De Niro's owes much to the sense of older performers displaying well-honed skills and passing on their knowledge to the younger actors around them. Even for young male stars who are teenage pin-ups (and thus operate as celebrities) the adoption of the method approach can work as a sign of more serious intentions. Depp's shift (the thickening body, the incoherent explanations) in Donnie Brasco (Newell, 1997) may be an early move in that process while the languid sexuality of Brad Pitt in Thelma and Louise (1991) has been replaced by a more self-aware attention to the details of accent and posture in Se7en (Fincher, 1995) and The Devil's Own (1997).

The more widespread recourse to method acting has also affected the relationship between the star and others in the film. The hierarchy of performance was always clear in classic Hollywood films in which stars were surrounded and supported by character actors and second-rank sidekicks. In acting terms, there was a difference between the personification mode of the stars and the character acting which surrounded them. That difference is now much less pronounced and this change explains what would otherwise seem to be quite a contradictory shift, on the one hand to ensemble playing and on the other to acting as confrontation and contrast. In the emphasis on ensemble, the gangster film has played a key role. Unlike the western, the gangster film has remained a consistently strong genre and its stories of male groups, explosive violence and narcisism have meshed with cinematic method acting's characteristic emphasis on internal conflict expressed through the body. An early and influential example of this can be found in The Godfather (Coppola, 1972) where the stars Marlon Brando and Al Pacino are surrounded by actors whose performances are similarly expressive in their apparently inarticulate reliance on gesture and facial expressions. An interesting variant on this occurs in Goodfellas (Scorsese, 1990) where the major star De Niro is one of the group who supports the relatively unknown Ray Liotta, and also in Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino, 1991) where each of the group is given moments of playing centre stage.

The ensemble playing, which tends to position the star as 'one of the boys', is paralleled by a strong sense of performance as competition which is generated when actors, operating in the same performance mode (which itself emphasises internal conflict), are given equal weight in narratives which hinge on external conflict and opposition between them. This rivalry is internally generated by the text and its power comes from the appeal to aesthetic judgements (which is the better actor?) rather than from stories of off-screen rivalry or different fan allegiances. This aesthetic dimension is underpinned by strong associations with similar contexts in sport and particularly boxing, an unsurprising analogy given method acting's strong association with issues of masculinity. The encounter between Pacino and De Niro in Heat (Mann, 1995) is a vivid example of this kind of context. Both are well known as cinematic method actors. The narrative sets them in opposition as policeman and criminal and they watch, follow and photograph each other until, well over halfway through the film, they meet face to face in a coffee bar. The shot/reverse-shot system concentrates on faces, framing tighter as the scene goes on. Though both give highly restrained performances, Pacino is the more edgy, his head stretched from his shoulders like a watchful bird, his eyes more open and alert. He leans towards De Niro and the camera whereas De Niro leans back, more hunched down, his eyes narrowed. Their bodies thus mirror each other as in the dialogue they discuss how they are locked together through their work. Difference is thus displayed but a strong sense of complementary performances is also established. The cultural value of such acting was neatly summed up by the Sight and Sound reviewer who searched for a comparison and suggested that if Heat were a play you could imagine De Niro and Pacino swapping roles every night like Olivier and Richardson in Othello's (Wraathall, 1996: 44).

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The development of the star-as-performer as a means of reclaiming the cultural value means that we need perhaps to look again at how we understand the audience's activity in relation to stars. Dyer's emphasis on stars as means of exploiting social identity ['We're identified by stars because they enact ways of making sense of the experience of being a person' (1987: 17)] has been combined with an emphasis on cultural studies on the extra textual world of fans, which I discussed earlier. Polysemic and resistance thus became key terms in thinking about film stars, and the fan position, which is strongly associated with the star-as-celebrity, was assumed to be the ideal position from which to understand a star. For some kinds of stars and for some performances, however, this emphasis on the extra textual is not necessary and it is the audience's understanding of the specifically cinematic pleasures of genre and performance which needs to be foregrounded. The different modes of stardom I have described require different kinds of knowledge from audiences and although some film stars do operate
as celebrities, knowledge of this is not essential to understanding their film appearances. The construction of Johnny Depp as a celebrity relies on extratextual knowledge of his bad behaviour and his stormy on/off affair with Kate Moss. For the category of performer, this extratextual information is largely irrelevant. Understanding Depp’s significance in Domino Branco comes entirely from textual knowledge of the performance itself, from its contrast to the rather fragile and whimsical acting styles Depp adopted in Edward Scissorhands (Burton, 1990) and What’s Eating Gilbert Grape? (Hillstrom, 1993) and from the comparisons to be made with the performances of other male stars, such as De Niro and Pacino, who have used this method-influenced approach.

**Analysing the female star**

My discussion so far, particularly on the professional and the performer, has concentrated on male stars. I want to look now at how these categories might be applied to women film stars. In doing so, I think it is important to recognise that women stars do operate in a different context from their male counterparts. This is expressed both by the stars themselves, for instance, complaints about the lack of good parts, and in the ‘common sense’ of the industry. A striking example of the common assumptions about female stars can be found in Screen International’s yearly assessment (since 1992) of the ‘top actors’ or key ‘power players’. Women are both in a marked minority in the lists and the subject of generalized comments about the sheer unlikeliness of women as stars. Thus, the failure of The Scarlet Letter (Sofie, 1995) becomes the failure of Demi Moore as a star, and then a question about women more generally; it raised ‘the same ugly question: can she carry a film? Can any actress carry a film?’ (Screen International, 15 December 1995, p. 19).

The category of celebrity is one which works well for female stars. Women function effectively as spectacles in the press and on television as well as in the cinema. In addition, the common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity fits with the emphasis, in the discourse of celebrity, on the private life and the leisure activity of the star. The ‘biography’ of the woman star then can be appropriately used to make a star-as-celebrity out of her. Drew Barrymore offers an extreme but by no means unique example of an actress whose film appearances are set in the context of a turbulent private life. Stories of love affairs, weddings and divorces bring women stars into the arena of tabloid journalism while in more staid (and stage-managed) interviews stars such as Demi Moore stress the importance of creating domestic space in which their children can grow up. Julia Roberts offers a particularly interesting example of the way in which such stardom can be built and around celebrity. Charlotte Brundson’s analysis of Roberts’ most famous role, as Vivian in Pretty Woman (Marshall, 1990), draws attention to the way in which her nervy awkwardness is transformed by her naturalness and the unconscious ‘power of her beauty’ (1997: 99). Since then, her film performances have been patchy but her celebrity status is based precisely on this contrast between the successful life her beauty seems to deserve and the disasters to which her natural impulses lead her.

As Brundson suggests, there are strong possibilities for identification in the way in which Roberts lives out of the difficulties of femininity and I would suggest that the intermittent success of her films (Screen International, 12 December 1998, speaks of ‘yet another comeback’) is less important for her role as a star than her consistent extratextual interest as a celebrity.”

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While the celebrity category may flourish on inconsistent behaviour in the personal sphere and contradictions between public and private selves, the professional star depends on a consistent sense of self and the willingness of the industry to franchise a role. Female candidates for this category might be Sigourney Weaver in her Ripley role and Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor in the Terminator films. Both films offered a strong female character who was identified with the actress playing it and had the emphasis on action associated with the professional category. Despite the strong sense of identification many fans felt with these actresses/characters, neither did well enough in the industry’s terms, to feature in Screen International’s lists or establish a secure franchise. Hamilton did not make enough films to demonstrate a consistent persona and Weaver seems to have actively tried to avoid the typing associated with the professional category. She has starred in other genres – comedy, for instance, in Working Girl (Nichols, 1988), a biopic in Gorillas in the Mist (Apted, 1988) and artistic dramas in Death and a Maid (Polanski, 1994). The difference between her and Harrison Ford in Working Girl is instructive; while Ford maintains his professional mode by playing the hero with silent bemusement, Weaver gives a broad and excessively villainous sweep to her portrayal of Katherine, turning herself into the monster against whom the heroine struggles. Although she maintains a consistent star image as a strong woman, Weaver as an actress appears to refuse the restrictions of the professional category and hence the kind of stardom which the male action heroes have established.

The female star who comes closest to success as a professional is perhaps Whoopi Goldberg. Screen International commented on her success in Sister Act (Aradino, 1992) by describing her as ‘an unlikely star’, which would seem to be a reference to her race and gender since the consistency of her roles and her identification with comedy are comparable to a male comedy star. Screen International indeed half recognises this by emphasising her financial worth: ‘by making sure she gets her worth – $7 million dollars for Sister Act II – she also became a landmark of a different kind: an actress with the clout of a male star’ (10 December 1993, p. 21). The association of money and power with masculinity even when discussing a black, female star is entirely typical. The cost for Goldberg, though, has been the restriction of her image to that of an outsider whose asexual appearance and comic mannerisms diminish any threat to white audiences (Mayne, 1995; Stuart, 1995).

It may seem easier for women to develop into stars through the category of performers, a mode in which cultural value is more important than financial pulling power. However, the codification of cinematic method acting that has worked so well for male stars has not been so helpful for their female counterparts. Counsell suggests that the method’s emphasis on the divided self worked against women in that while ‘the iconography of neurosis quickly became an acceptable way of representing men’, the neurotic woman was ‘demonised... as victim or villainess’. The Method actress ‘could not be “normal” enough’ for Hollywood’s restricted vision of appropriate female behaviour (1996: 76). Two other factors may also be at play. The method approach, emphasising as it did the repression and release of emotion,
gave male actors the task of expressing feelings as well as providing action. In some senses, male stars took over the traditional role of women and provided the tears as well as the punches. In addition, the emphasis on ensemble playing has perhaps worked rather differently for women stars. While ensemble playing by women is a feature of certain kinds of women’s film, such as How to make an American Quilt (Moorehouse, 1995), the emphasis on male groups in the more prestigious gangster and thriller genres has tended to take attention away from the actresses’ performance. Thus, even in Goodfellas (Scorsese, 1990), a gangster film which is highly unusual in its emphasis on the home life of the gangster, Lorraine Bracco’s performance as the wife cannot match the weight of the ensemble playing of De Niro, Pesci, Liotta and the rest of the gang.

It is possible, however, to see cinematic method acting in some performances by contemporary women stars. Jodie Foster’s performances, for instance, in The Accused (Kaplan, 1988) and The Silence of Lambs (Demme, 1991) are marked by the way in which internal division and doubt are expressed in gestures, silences, explosions of emotion comparable to that of male stars. It is not accidental that these critically successful performances were given in thriller/court-room dramas since in these films Foster was given access, which generally women stars do not have, to the gangster/thriller genres where the method has worked most successfully for male stars. Foster’s performances in other genres—Somersby (Amiel, 1993), Nell (Apted, 1994) were less well received and her strong track record rests on her position as a producer and director as well as an actor though, as with Whoopi Goldberg, her success is exposed in the industry through male comparisons: ‘if this is a boy’s game, then Jodie plays it like the boys’ with a balance of caution and boldness’ (.Screen International, 10 December 1993, p. 21). A more unusual example of a method-influenced performance, in that it occurred in a literary adaptation, was that of Nicole Kidman in Portrait of a Lady (Campion, 1996). Here Campion’s visceral direction with its dramatic use of close-ups focused attention on Kidman’s physical expression of Isabel Archer’s voluntary entailment in the way she walked, slumbered and even struggled for breath.

Conclusions

A final example illustrates the different way in which stars make meaning through the categories I have outlined and how gender and race inflect these categories. The Bodyguard (Jackson, 1992) was critically derided but was a huge commercial success. bell hooks (1994) has pointed out that the film’s doomed romance between the black singer Rachel Marcon (Whitney Houston) and her white bodyguard Frank Farmer (Kevin Costner) is predicated on its unspoken assumptions about the impossibility of successful interracial relationships in Hollywood films. But The Bodyguard is also worth considering in terms of stars as well as narrative for what we get is a contest between the two stars which throws interesting light on film stardom in 1990s’ Hollywood. The film’s huge grosses put Houston into 11th position on Screen International’s 1996 list of top-20 screen stars, making her the first of only three female stars included. She brings to the film her star status as a singer/celebrity which is treated respectfully. The camera circles her, giving the audience both her beautiful face and long shots of her dancing, exercising and singing. The narrative makes her vulnerable and potentially a victim, but we are continually reminded of her (invulnerable) star status by the songs and her composed demeanour. Costner, on the other hand, still carries with him the success of Dances with Wolves (Costner, 1990). Although he had a reputation as a pin-up, the film seems more concerned to emphasise his performance. He thus seeks to express his character’s ambivalent obsession with his job and his fear that exposing his vulnerability in love will make him less good at it. This narrative motivation may not, as Hooks indicates, be very strong but it gets its resonances from our familiarity with such internal conflicts as performed by a succession of male stars. The film thus neatly demonstrates how two big stars can be so different and need different analysis to account for their meaning. Houston is treated as a pin-up who sings; Costner is given an acting performance. Houston is given very little space to express any feeling; Costner uses cinematic method techniques to indicate that he is trying to express the inexpressible. Houston’s star status is secure in the popular enjoyment of her voice and songs; Costner is trying to claim cultural status of a different order as a serious actor. And, of course, Houston as a black woman would find it almost impossible to claim the ground on which Costner is staking his claim to stardom. In the end, it is not just the narrative but the different concepts attached to stardom which reinforce their separate worlds and send Houston back to her singing and Costner back to his work.

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Notes

1. As is indicated here, Dyer did recognize consistency in a star image. I am suggesting that the interest in difference in film and cultural studies has overemphasized the notion of star instability in his work.
2. Bradshaw (1997, 100) draws on Jennifer Wyke’s concept of ‘celebrity feminism’ in her analysis. The category interestingly links film stars with women academics and writers in a way which illustrates the fluidity of the star category.
3. Counsell (1996) suggests that, in an earlier period, Jane Fonda was the only method actress to be offered high-profile parts in films and compares this to the success of method actors from the 1950s onwards.

References


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From Beyond Control to In Control: Investigating Drew Barrymore’s Feminist Agency/Authorship

Rebecca Williams

In this essay, I shall consider the actress Drew Barrymore, one of Hollywood’s most successful female stars, able to command $50 million dollars per appearance (Kurzberg, 2004) and responsible for producing numerous box office hits. Approaching this from a broadly feminist perspective, I will first offer a brief overview of previous theories of Stardom, feminism and agency. In this discussion I will move on to outline the arguments made by Melissa Pearl Friedling (2000) who suggested that throughout the early to mid-1990s, secondary materials surrounding Drew Barrymore emphasized her status as a former drug and alcohol addict to present a limited, often contradictory feminist reading of her star persona. I will counter this argument, suggesting that Barrymore is no longer denied agency by her former addiction and that her recent successes suggest that she promises the possibility of ‘star’ authorship. I will go on to illustrate how she is able to display active agency by regulating and exercising considerable control over the projects she is involved in and via her position as an active producer in her company Flower Films. I will move on to offer a broad discussion of her ambivalent feminist status via analysis of her films and secondary publicity materials suggesting that, as Friedling argued, this remains complex and contradictory. However, in conclusion, I will argue that this is now due not to Barrymore’s status as a former addict. Rather, it emerges from an interplay between her relative power in the Hollywood industry, and the constraints of its economic frameworks – including generic expectation, agents and managers, and the mass media.

Theorizing female stars

Recent studies have begun to offer serious critical attention to mainstream movie stars of the typically culturally devalued blockbuster genre, such as Jim Carrey (Drake, 2004), Jackie Chan (Gallagher, 2004), Will Smith (King, 2003) and Keanu Reeves (Rutsky, 2001). However, with a few exceptions (Geraghty, 2003; Kramer, 2006; Zuk, 1998), there persists a neglect of the mainstream female star with discussions remaining highly gendered. The notion of star agency is clearly demarcated between