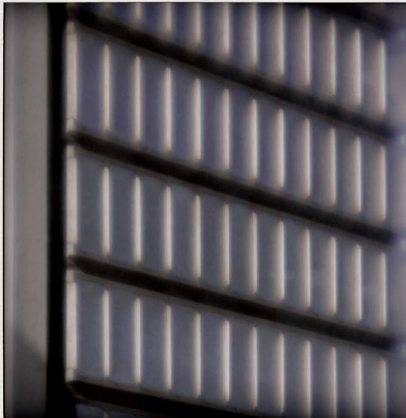


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



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Approaching celebrity – sketching an analytical framework

Michael Rübsamen

1. INTRODUCTION

There are few research subjects that are so filled with glamour and myth as that of celebrity studies. Celebrities fill the media with all their passionate intensity, as well as provoking passionate discussions amongst media audiences. How deeply are you in love with Justin Bieber? And just how provoked are you by Rebecca Black? Today, celebrities are a constant presence in our lives: both in politics and in diverse media and entertainment outlets. With one click of a mouse or one flick of the remote control, all of us have instant and intimate access to the lives of celebrities. And regardless of whether we view them as secret power-holders or as a powerless elite, celebrities have come to exert considerable influence on contemporary politics, ideas and fashions. It is for this reason that they are deserving of our critical attention.

This chapter considers the ways in which Swedish celebrities can be understood as both a cultural and a mediated phenomenon. My initial concern will be to develop an understanding of how, in the Swedish context, the arena of celebrity has changed over the years. Of particular interest is the question of how to build an empirical understanding of the status systems and informal normative regulations by means of which someone can be viewed as a celebrity. The main goal is to shed light on the process of celebrity construction in the modern, or late modern, era. How can we understand the somewhat simple and vulgar observation that nowadays you can be relatively ignorant and be lacking in personal attributes, and yet if you are willing to be locked up in a house for a hundred days, you can emerge with the status of a celebrity? Perhaps Andy Warhol was right when he said that everybody could have their fifteen minutes of fame? Or should that be that everyone who becomes famous only remains so for fifteen minutes?

In an attempt to provide some answers to the questions above, I will first of all propose a theoretical model that we can use to investigate the processes involved in celebrity construction. I will then go on to consider to what extent these may have changed in the course of the last few decades. For all the changes that the media ecology has gone through since the middle of the last century, this is not the only explanation for the transformation of celebrity culture over the same period. The assumption is, rather, that something has changed within the wider culture and that this in turn is reflected in the way that notable celebrities manifest themselves today.

2. CELEBRITY STUDIES AS A RESEARCH FIELD

There has been an immense development in the research into celebrity culture over the last two decades (Beer and Penfold-Mounce, 2010). This may result from the fact that popular culture itself has risen in status within the community of researchers. Researchers have generally distanced themselves from the scoffing attitude of scholars such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1993), who tended to view popular and/or celebrity culture as nothing more than opium for the masses. Nowadays, however, the study of celebrity is used more constructively as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of contemporary culture. One might even advance the claim that, in certain respects, celebrities can be viewed as cultural seismographs.

To say that popular/celebrity culture is now viewed differently than it was by an earlier generation of researchers is not to say that the ideas of Adorno and Horkheimer have no relevance, especially with respect to issues such as power relationships. Clearly such issues are an important aspect of celebrity studies, just as they are of media studies. Likewise, celebrity studies is further connected to the larger field of media studies insofar as it is only through a carefully controlled mediating process that celebrity is conferred or created. Another aspect of celebrity studies is that it is closely connected to media and communication studies, since the mediation of the celebrity persona is inherently important to the creation of the celebrity (Drake and Miah, 2010; Rojek, 2001). In short, the field of celebrity studies mirrors several of the problems within the overall field of media and communications in terms of methodologies, research subjects, ontological and epistemological debates.

The field of celebrity studies has been considerably extended since the early pioneers, such as Alberoni (1962) or Boorstin (1961). Whilst some interest began to be taken in the celebrity phenomenon in the 1970s (Dyer 1979, 2004), it was not until the first decade of the new millennium that the field experienced a major boom. The last 10 years have seen scholars discussing celebrities as manifestations of power and as constructs of the culture industries (Turner, 2003). Attempts have also been made to position the field in relation to politics (van Zoonen, 2005), and to discuss the role played by the audience in celebrity construction (Couldry, 2000; Drake and Miah, 2010). Celebrity studies is, thus, very much an applied discipline within media and communications, but can also be seen to draw inspiration from a range of other disciplines, including sociology, political science, film studies, psychology, history and gender studies.

3. CELEBRITY AS A STATUS SYSTEM

If we wish to analyse celebrity in a constructive way, we need to find a way to grasp this quite fluid concept. Since definitions have a tendency to be either too broad or too narrow, we could use a taxonomy such as the one put forward by Rojek (2001). He suggests that a useful way to distinguish between different types of celebrity is to talk either about status by merit of lineage, such as in the case of royalty or of distinguished families such as the Kennedys (ascribed celebrity); status by merit of achievement or competition, such as sports heroes, actors or musicians (achieved celebrity); or status by merit of cultural mediation, such as reality show contestants or professional minglers (attributed celebrity). It is also important to make mention of Rojek's term 'celetoids', by which he means a distilled and concentrated form of attributed celebrity status resulting from living in a fast-paced mediated society. Lottery winners, one-hit wonders and kiss-and-tellers who have short and intense periods of fame or notoriety should therefore not be labelled celebrities, but celetoids. (Rojek, 2001:21)

But this taxonomy needs to be developed and examined in greater depth. To do this, we will re-introduce the concept of status as discussed by classical scholars such as Max Weber, who pointed out that status is closely connected to lifestyle (Weber, 1983:212), or C. W. Mills (Mills, 1971), who pointed out that the classic Marxist way of viewing power and elites in terms of social class is in many ways inadequate. Mills points out that in America, which historically lacks a proper bourgeoisie, status is a more fruitful way of understanding power relations (Mills, 1971:17). One of the first attempts to make use of this distinction as far as celebrities are con-

cerned and to employ it as an analytical tool is that of Alberoni's 'powerless elite' (Alberoni, 1962), which I regard as an ironic allusion to Mills' notion of a "power elite". The concept of status also surfaces in a somewhat mutated form in, for example, Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1984), in which economic or political capital is not regarded as the only way to create and maintain status, but where social or cultural capital are also seen as important building blocks.

Apart from theorising about the construction of status, we also need to be able to discern how status is created and maintained. We need to be able to discern the kinds of privileges meted out to celebrities. These include economic, normative, interactional and legal privileges (Kurzman et al., 2007). We need ways to find concrete manifestations of celebrity status such as those identified by Murray Millner Jr. According to Milner, there are several important similarities between power elites and celebrity elites in terms of observable markers and characteristics of status (Milner Jr., 2005).

Milner concludes that status, in general, is inalienable. It is, in other words, impossible to distinguish status from the person within whom it resides. Status is also unexpanding in the sense that it can be viewed as a fixed amount of capital. If someone wants to have status, it needs to be taken from someone else. Furthermore status is dependent on the celebrity's ability to conform to the norms of the elite. And finally, social elite status is dependent on one's social associations with other people of equal or higher status¹. To be seen together with other celebrities is, thus, an important confirmation.

Just as with common elite status, it is important to make a distinction between distance and proximity. Celebrities are distanced from the general audience. Maybe less so in Sweden than in the US or the UK but still they function on another level from ordinary mortals. The world they inhabit is one of magic and glamour; and thus a certain distance is required to create the necessary tension in the relationship between the celebrity and his/her public. By being distanced in this way, celebrities are elevated into a glamorous and magical sphere, which is unattainable for the common man. Celebrities are celebrated for simply being well known, as Boorstin put it (Boorstin, 1961:61). This can be seen to represent a shift in being

1 The American stand-up comedian Bob Saget once beautifully illustrated the nature and importance of social association in the show *That Ain't Right*, saying that: "Name dropping is bullshit. Quentin Tarantino told me that. He said 'Name-dropping is bullshit' and I said 'you're friggin' right Quentin'"

able to derive celebrity from accomplishments, to attention in general. This means that being visible is one of the key elements in the building of status. But the shift is somewhat deeper since it also tends to lift celebrity into a broader societal context. Milner calls this process of integrating the celebrity into overall culture 'celebrification' (Milner Jr., 2005).

4. CELEBRITY IN THE FLUIDNESS OF THE TIMES

If we wish to see achievement or accomplishment as factors in the perception/production/construction of celebrity, we need to return to Rojek's distinction between achieved and attributed celebrity status. Rojek's view is that a celebrity requires both. But in order to fully understand the construction of celebrity we also need to take into account the societal context in which celebrity is constructed. Rojek points to the fact that the term 'celebrity' has two etymological connections. First, it is connected with the Latin word 'celere', which he translates as rapid or fluid, but the word is also linked with the French word 'celebrer' - to celebrate. The notion of the rapidity and fluidity of contemporary times has been the subject of considerable scholarly interest of late. Featherstone (1987; 1988; 1994a; 1994b), for instance, talks about an important shift in contemporary society from a production culture to a consumer culture. According to Featherstone, we have entered an era of aesthetic culture in which we are encountering new groups of intellectuals from the areas of public relations, fashion and media, which are acting as the prime conveyors of culture and values. We thus gain insight into the rapidity and fluidness of contemporary society when we take a close look at celebrity culture.

But the aesthetisation of society may also be something that is reflected in our celebrities' style of consumption (see Dyer, 1979). We can observe, for instance, how the private and the public merge together into a hybrid of a public/private life, where the 'private' can instantaneously become 'public'. Dyer notes that an important aspect of this can be found in the consumption habits thereby displayed. In other words, the consumption of celebrities has always been important, but it is becoming even more important. Again, this may be understood to be a reflection of what Bauman suggests to be the most important characteristic of our current time: a constant demand for more consumption and the fulfilment and gratification of new desires.

Sennett's view of the new capitalism (Sennett, 2007) offers us another interesting point of departure on how to perceive celebrity in terms of the

relationship between craftsmanship and status. According to Sennett, the economy in the postmodern era is characterised by instability, change and migration, dissolution and fragmentation (Sennett, 2007:16). And with so much change and turbulence, workers in the new capitalism will, in Sennett's view, confront diverse new challenges. In particular, the new era of postmodernity will require a constant development of new talents and skills. This immediately raises the question as to the kind of status that talent and skill will acquire in this new era. Sennett points out that a highly developed craftsmanship is a trademark of the modern era, where someone earns credit for the knowledge and skill they possess. But in a postmodern era, the economy promotes potential and talent. Adaptiveness and fluidity demand a whole new set of skills from the worker. When Sennett looks at doctors and engineers, he points out that members of these professions have, on a regular basis, to unlearn their whole skill set, because methods and procedures become obsolete so quickly. The new era does not look at the skill itself, but considers the potential of what someone might become in terms of their craft. Instead of a prolonged education where the worker learns his craft, a new set of intellectual skills is required. The worker needs to be able to adapt and change. If anything, craftsmanship is seen as a quality or attribute that represents an unwillingness to change. The consequence is that the economy of today begins to resemble a game show like *American Idol* or *X-Factor*. Thus, when a group of judges are vetting applicants' performance ability, they are not necessarily focusing on the applicants' actual skill level, but are, rather, assessing their performance potential. For *Idol* contestants, therefore, it is far more devastating to be told by the judges that "You lack potential" than to be told "You messed up!".

5. LOOKING AT CELEBRITY CASES

If we relate some of the above remarks to the present discussion of celebrity, we might well discern how certain aspects of contemporary culture are reflected in the celebrity phenomenon. It might even provide an explanation for the rapid careers of celebrities and the popularity they enjoy. Let us return to the notion that you do not need to know or be able to do so much to become a celebrity today. When the focus shifts from what people actually do to what they are and what we can expect them to do (or become!), careers necessarily become swifter. It also goes without saying that returns on investment need to be just as swift. Celebrities come and go with astonishing rapidity in the media industry's constant and relentless quest for new talent.

I will now take a very brief look at the careers of two Swedish celebrities' careers in order to discover what light they can shed on issues relating to celebrity, and also what they can tell us about the changing media landscape².

Björn Skifs is a veteran of the Swedish entertainment business, with a long and illustrious career since he made his debut in the middle of the 1960s. His career has involved pop music (including scoring a number one on the American billboard list with the song "*Hooked on a feeling*"), acting on both screen and stage as well as hosting television shows. Skifs' first claim to fame, albeit on a smaller scale, was when the pop group he was leading, *Slam Creepers*, won the Swedish pop band contest in 1966. They were a band of preciously innocent times. They had been performing together for about four years in the rural village of Vansbro. Skifs' father was a well-known local performer, writing, performing and directing for the local revue scene. Skifs often remembers in interviews that he used to stay at the side of the stage peeping out while his father performed. Skifs went on from leading the pop group to launching a career as a solo artist. He appeared on television, participating in both the Eurovision song contest and as an entertainer in comedy shows. He also made stage appearances and acted on the big screen. As a celebrity, he epitomises the perfect classic entertainer, with virtually no scandals and with hardly anybody wanting to say a bad word about him.

By contrast, Carolina Gynning has relatively few people to cheer her on or say that she is doing a great job! But she has still managed to keep a high profile for a considerable number of years. Gynning could be described as the ultimate contemporary celebrity, starting as a glamour model and winning the Swedish version of *Big Brother* in 2004. After this success her career really took off. She hosted several television shows, worked again as a glamour model, wrote two autobiographies and even found the time to do some painting. She is constantly reinventing herself and distancing herself from her history almost to the point of denial. A recurrent statement of hers is that she is the new Carolina Gynning. By distancing herself from her history, she has also distanced herself from herself. Taking one's cue from Bauman (2007), one could almost refer to her as a perfect example of the current era's tendency to pointillism. Gynning has no history, only a present and a near future, in which she is promising to reveal some new side of herself.

2 The cases are collected from my Ph.D. project, which consists of four cases. For the sake of clarity and space, I have restricted myself to including just two of them in this text.

If we consider the differences between these two celebrities, we can detect that something has changed between the time when Skifs made his breakthrough in the middle to late 1960s and the time when Gynning first entered the celebrity arena. Almost 40 years separates their respective breakthroughs. This provides us with an opportunity to discuss their underlying differences.

Skifs' career can be likened to a carefully crafted object which began with the finding of some promising raw material, which was carefully moulded and crafted over a period of time during which he and his pop group travelled the countryside, honing their craft. Skifs is akin to a fine carpenter, who develops their raw material and methodically produces an item that is built to last, one where the changes have been made gradually over time and where attention has always been paid to the inherent qualities of the material. He has also expanded his career into covering other closely related art forms, with a firm grounding in entertainment (not unlike the classical entertainers like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr.) Gynning, on the other hand, was propelled into the limelight from virtual obscurity. Her career had been primarily focused on glamour modelling, without any direct celebrity status worth mentioning. With her victory in the Big Brother programme, she quickly established herself as a Swedish celebrity personality. Rather than fading back into obscurity like most reality show contestants, Gynning was able to maintain her presence. While Skifs' career depends on his ability and talent primarily as a singer, and his gradual development as an entertainer, Gynning's career has been much more chaotic and unpredictable. She has jumped from low culture to high culture, playing with concepts and multiple identities (Gynning & Carlqvist, 2006; 2009). While Skifs has been a stable personality, Gynning's persona has shifted repeatedly. In this respect Skifs can be seen to represent the earlier era's slower and gradual development, while Gynning epitomises the eternal thirst for new experiences and new modes of production.

6. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

To write about and discuss celebrities might be one of the most fascinating challenges a media researcher may undertake. The researcher must face the challenge of trying to define a quite fluid concept and to break down preconceptions, especially that celebrities are a strictly low-culture phenomenon. After that we need to turn celebrities into academic problems. Almost everyone has ideas and opinions on celebrities, and we must not

fall into the trap of becoming mesmerised by the glamour they project or merely write biographies of the people we want to investigate. We have to move into the area where the celebrity as a person, the media and the audience interact and thereby construct an elite status. This means that we need an understanding of how the media systems work as well as of how the cultural values regarding status elites function. In this chapter I have sketched an analytical framework that can help us in our task to make research questions and academic problems out of the structures that surround and create celebrities. By viewing celebrities as reflections or embodiments of ideals and values, we can obtain a deeper understanding of the times, the societies and the cultural environments we, and they, inhabit.

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