

Learning to Speak This New Celebrity Culture

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When I posed this question for a potential conference roundtable, I was teaching an undergraduate seminar on stardom in U.S. media and popular culture. In the conversations taking place in the class throughout the semester, I had been struck by how my own knowledge and even fairly recent scholarship on stardom was feeling dated and out of touch.

For one, the Hollywood-driven star system is evolving at a rapid pace, as former paradigms of American identity, success, and beauty are being challenged by stars who likely would have experienced obstacles to being cast in lead roles or promoted as stars in previous decades. Will Smith's immense success as a blockbuster film star, Michael Cera's rise to stardom as a new model of American masculinity, America Ferrera's critical acclaim in the lead role in Ugly Betty, and Jennifer Beals' visibility as a mixed-race actress playing a mixed-race character on The L Word are just a few examples of contemporary stardom that reflect shifts in how we see ourselves as Americans, as men and women, and as racialized individuals, as well as in how Hollywood producers and publicists envision and cater to potential audiences.

Even greater shifts can be witnessed, moreover, in new celebrity promotion forums and modes of celebrity watching that have become commonplace, particularly for younger media consumers. Differences between what Richard Dyer termed promotion (deliberate marketing of a star, often in conjunction with promotion of a media text) and publicity (supposedly unplanned and less controlled public glimpses of a star) are increasingly difficult to discern, particularly with the rise of stars such as Lauren Conrad who have become celebrities through participating in reality television programming and thus through being filmed seemingly "being themselves."

Youtube and celebrity gossip blogs also have opened up distinctly new ways to engage with star texts; with these new forums, notions of celebrity authenticity and our expectations of stars' private versus public lives appear to be mutating to degrees that we have barely begun to explore. For example, that semester my class and I watched Britney Spears mismatch her clothes and gadabout in a drugged stupor on a daily basis, while Perez Hilton was becoming a celebrity in his own right and former model Tila Nguyen, better known by her stage name Tila Tequila, had her own reality dating show after *she* had become a self-made MySpace celebrity. Scholars of stardom clearly have a lot of catching up to do. Where to begin?

As media celebrity spills well beyond the confines of film, television, and traditional star promotion events such as the film premiere, scholarship on stardom can feel clunkily tethered to its roots in film history scholarship. It thus will be important to challenge and complicate the underlying paradigms of star studies in research that aims to follow celebrity culture to its new sources, mediums, and audience practices. In this regard, a notable gap in current scholarship is our lack of precise terminology to describe the phenomena we are studying. Terms such as “stardom,” “celebrity,” and “fandom,” even when qualified with important nuances such as contributed in recent years by scholars such as Christine Geraghty, Diane Negra, Paul McDonald, Joshua Gamson, and Graeme Turner, only offer rough outlines for understanding and articulating the implications of these new permutations of celebrity culture. I do not have new terms to proffer at this time, but do know that many popular figures today could be said to spill beyond prior definitions of stardom and celebrity, even while they are engaged with in a manner that bridges both terms.

It also appears that new central questions need to be posed in relation to the meanings of stars and celebrities today. If we keep up with details of the private lives of contemporary stars

because we hold them in contempt rather than see them as models to emulate, for example, how can we understand these dynamics in relation to early scholarship on film stars as models of identity? What if reality series stars are fascinating for us because we see them as the ultimate in blandness, or if we tune into a celebrity's self-made Youtube video because she is a train wreck rather than an icon? Just as a start, I believe our scholarship needs to broaden beyond media and cultural studies and make further connections to such disciplines as new media studies, cultural anthropology, sociology, and religion studies, and to deliberately partake in multiple methods of research and analysis, so that we might come to more nuanced understanding of our fascination and engagement with these new star figures and celebrity watching practices.