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The Origins of the Film Star System / George Clooney

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The year 2019 marked 40 years since the publication of *Stars* – Richard Dyer’s seminal intervention in film studies which promoted the importance of, and provided a framework for, analysing film stars. The anniversary prompted some reflection on the current state of star studies in a special issue of *Celebrity Studies* journal[1] and at a symposium ‘Reinvigorating and Reinvigorating Stardom’ hosted by the University of Warwick in November 2019. It is apt that this year also saw two significant book publications in the field. Despite sharing a publisher (Bloomsbury), Paul McDonald’s *George Clooney* and Andrew Shail’s *The Origins of the Film Star System: Persona, Publicity and Economics in Early Cinema* have significant differences. While McDonald focuses on George Clooney and his films from 1994 to 2016, Shail addresses a number of very early stars and the birth of the film star system – around 1910. McDonald’s concern is with a US star in the US context, while Shail supplements consideration of the emerging US industry with the situation in France. Crucially, the authors occupy different positions in, and display divergent attitudes towards, star studies.

McDonald’s connection to star studies, and especially Dyer, was first indicated by his supplementary chapter which accompanied the 1998 reissue of Dyer’s *Stars*. This acknowledged Dyer’s central place in the field, cemented by his 1986 book *Heavenly Bodies*, which examined Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland. It also highlighted other scholars’ interventions, most notably those working on history (deCordova 1990) and ethnography (Stacey 1994). McDonald’s own main contributions, *The Star System: Hollywood’s Production of Popular Identities* (2000) and *Hollywood Stardom* (2013), were built on an awareness of industrial context. His *George Clooney* narrows the *Hollywood Stardom* analysis of a few Hollywood stars from the 1990s to

the 2010s (case studies on Tom Hanks, Will Smith, and Julia Roberts) to one star, as it is the latest addition to the British Film Institute's (BFI) important star series. The volumes are authored by various scholars, with each taking an in-depth look at a different film star. The subjects range from earlier studio-era Hollywood (e.g. Susan Smith's *Elizabeth Taylor* [2012] and John Mercer's *Rock Hudson* [2015]) to Clooney's contemporaries (such as Cynthia Baron's 2015 book on Denzel Washington and Pam Cook's 2012 consideration of Nicole Kidman) and also include European stars (Ginette Vincendeau's *Brigitte Bardot* [2013]) and stars of world cinema (Sunny Singh's *Amitabh Bachchan* [2017]).

Perhaps in a nod to Dyer's key assertion that stars rely on contradictions (most notably they are usually both Ordinary and Extraordinary[2]), McDonald's *George Clooney* includes a dyad in each chapter title: Television/Film; Actor/Star; Independence/Hollywood; Entertainment/Politics. Chapter One, 'Cross Media Stardom: Television/Film', states that Clooney's first long term recurrent lead in a hit ensemble television series, Warner Brothers' *ER* (1994-1999), significantly provided him with a platform from which to launch himself as a film star. This was not untroubled. Critics considered Clooney a credible actor and 'emergent star' in the vampire crime road movie *From Dusk Till Dawn* (Robert Rodriguez, 1996) and the romantic comedy *One Fine Day* (Michael Hoffman, 1996) (p. 26). However, his appearance as legendary superhero Batman in Warner Brothers' big-budget *Batman & Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997) was less successful. For McDonald, this partially supports celebrity studies scholar P. David Marshall's insight that television stars face difficulties on the big screen: they have become too familiar as just one character (pp. 13; 23). McDonald shows that the matter is especially complex in *Batman & Robin*. Audience recognition is hampered by Clooney inevitably appearing suited and masked in the character of Batman, but also because he is afforded few scenes as his alter ego Bruce Wayne (pp. 31-32).

McDonald identifies the mid-budgeted *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh, 1998) as a turning point for Clooney. It was more positively received by critics than Clooney's outing as Batman but, more importantly, McDonald credits the film with 'defining [...] the Clooney brand' (pp. 35-44). McDonald's notion of a 'star brand' is similar to Dyer's 'star image', which vitally separated signs attached to the star on screen and off screen from the 'real' person whom we can never know,[3] but places additional emphasis on commerce. Retrospectively McDonald recognises *Out of Sight* as a 'star defining film' because it 'stabiliz[ed] the inconsistencies of Clooney's previous roles' and prefigured his

later film career (p. 37). Clooney's film constants include playing the lead in an ensemble cast; generic connections to comedy and crime and/or romance; a performance style which mixed 'suave bodily manners and vocal tones with comedic exaggeration'; and an association with 'cool' (p. 44). Furthermore, McDonald has earlier connected some of these traits to Clooney's *ER* days (pp. 17-20), providing consistency for an already formed large viewing public.

The book is very elegantly structured along broadly chronological lines, dealing with matters as they are relevant at a point in Clooney's career, while also relating back to aspects McDonald has seeded earlier. Chapter Two, 'Performing Stardom: Actor/Star', builds on Chapter One's assessment of Clooney's emerging film stardom, to further consider what it was about Clooney that propelled him from the ranks of vaguely known, and perhaps interchangeable, leading film actor to the upper echelons of instantly recognisable film stardom. When identifying aspects relating to Clooney's uniqueness, 'signs of Clooneyness', McDonald begins with individual markers which are attached to nearly all film stars: appearance and voice. Some of these are more mutable than others. McDonald considers that Clooney's voice is not only distinctly deep, but very evenly paced (p. 55). Clooney's physical appearance is occasionally less constant – although Clooney's face and jawline are unlikely to change, McDonald comments on his varying hairstyles (pp. 50-51) as well as his weight-gain for his role in Stephen Gaghan's 2005 film *Syriana* (pp. 51-52). While Chapter One analyses how Clooney's performance in *Out of Sight* juxtaposed 'frustrated fool' with 'debonair charmer' (pp. 38-43), McDonald affords the former detailed discussion in reference to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2000) and the latter in *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001). *Ocean's Eleven* is especially important in terms of its impact on audiences' perceptions of Clooney on screen. The star repeated his role of Danny Ocean in the two sequels (*Ocean's Twelve* in 2004 and *Ocean's Thirteen* in 2007 [both by Soderbergh]) and all three films received a wide release and performed strongly at the box office. The quality of 'cool' McDonald associates with the role (p. 85) therefore reached a large audience. It also expanded into notions of Clooney himself, as in advertisements for Nespresso coffee and Martini Clooney played 'George', a man with charm and poise – not unlike the man we may presume the 'real' Clooney to be (pp. 82-84).

After detailing Clooney's move from television to film and aspects unique to him, the second half of the book places Clooney more broadly in his industrial and political landscape. Chapter Three 'Flexible Stardom: Independence/Hollywood' draws on McDonald's *Hollywood Stardom* to expertly describe Hollywood studio and independent production in the US from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s. McDonald provides tables and charts concerning the approximately 25 films from this period in which Clooney played a leading or ensemble role. The figures for budget, box office, scale of release, and ratings (e.g. Parental Guidance) are very usefully juxtaposed with industry averages. While McDonald notes Clooney's early relationship with one studio (Warner Brothers for *ER* and several films) he discusses how he, like other stars, later diversified to become an actor-writer-director – a 'Hollywood Hyphenate' (p. 110). A further facet of Clooney is revealed in Chapter Four, 'Actorvist Stardom: Entertainment/Politics', which details how Clooney treads the line between the at times frivolous world of entertainment and serious issues. This brings together both Clooney's on-screen and off-screen personae. For the former, McDonald especially focuses on Clooney's appearances in *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) and *Syriana*. McDonald also insightfully comments on Clooney's own critique of his ability to be a 'magnifier' of issues which matter to him (p. 136). Significantly, Clooney's star status and concomitant wealth may make him seem out of touch with regular people; but Clooney's public questioning of his entitlement to such a privilege negotiates this. This speaks directly to Dyer's Ordinary/Extraordinary paradox.

McDonald concludes by referencing the title of a 2007 biography of Clooney by Kimberly Potts in his final chapter 'The Last Movie Star'. This considers Clooney's waning star in the context of his ageing as well as the 'decline of Hollywood stardom' (p. 168), since in the new millennium box office favours the franchise over the star (p. 167). McDonald's final sentence encapsulates his view of Clooney's brand, as he suggests that its most 'significant contribution [...] is the nostalgia it evokes for stardom itself' (p. 168). This returns to seeds McDonald has sown in the introduction and elsewhere – mentions of Clooney in reviews and articles which place him in relation to earlier Hollywood stars, most notably Cary Grant and Clark Gable. Other figures from Hollywood's past are brought to mind by the popular *Oceans*' franchise McDonald sees as important to Clooney and his quality of 'cool'. The first of Clooney's *Ocean* films is a remake of the 1960 film which featured stars who

epitomised contemporary cool – the Hollywood ‘ratpack’ Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr, Peter Lawford, etc.

While McDonald’s volume of the BFI’s star series extends star studies as established by Dyer into more industrial contexts, the book by early cinema scholar Shail diverges significantly from the discipline. Shail disagrees with what he perceives to be the field’s ‘preoccupation’ since the 1980s with ideological functions of each film star persona (p. 6). He specifically pushes back against Dyer’s insight that stars are useful to analyse due to their existence ‘in the world independent of their screen/”fiction” appearances’ (p. 6, quoting Dyer[4]) such as McDonald’s comment on Clooney as ‘George’ in advertisements. It is therefore unsurprising that Shail’s introduction interrogates selected aspects of Richard deCordova’s *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (1990). DeCordova linked differences in the way actors were written about in publications such as trade magazines to the evolution of stardom in the US. According to deCordova, those appearing in films were first ‘picture performers’,[5] acts rather than actors, but that discourse on acting laid the ground for ‘picture personalities’ (such as Florence Lawrence) to emerge around 1909.[6] DeCordova considered stardom to have begun in earnest in the US around 1913 or 1914, when a star’s private life was foregrounded.[7] By the 1920s the most personal aspect of private life, the sexual secret, threatened to overwhelm fictional roles as scandals raged.[8] Shail criticises deCordova’s (albeit occasional) claim that stardom not only existed alongside a focus on private life but was caused by it (p. 6). Because of Shail’s opposition to the ideological focus of star studies, he is less concerned with the *persona* of his book’s subtitle, focusing instead on *publicity* and *economics*, since he claims that the industry did not consider the private lives of stars essential (p. 6). The discourse that deCordova engages with is thought by Shail to be *necessary* but not *sufficient* to found the star system (p. 24).

Part One of Shail’s more economics-oriented ‘new run at the story’ sets out several business incentives for the star system to occur in Europe and North America. Shail also asserts that this depended on ‘local exceptions’ and ‘unlikely events’ (p. 61). The possibility that the start of the star system was unplanned is supported by the fact that surviving archives for the companies of the ‘first’ stardom-building campaigns Shail has identified – Pathé’s for France’s Max Linder, and Carl Laemmle of Independent Motion Pictures (IMP) in the US for Florence Lawrence – do not contain references to these retrospectively momentous campaigns (p. 61). Nonetheless, Shail affords

these two very early stars, and particularly their ‘first’ publicity, great significance. Shail’s extensive archive work (including trade press and company records) uncovers a poster for Linder’s appearance in Louis Gasnier’s *Le Petit Jeune Homme*, which was released in September 1909. This is supplemented by Shail’s useful table listing examples of publicity for Linder’s first 30 films, up to July 1910, which demonstrates that such forms of publicity continued to be deployed (Fig. 1.2; pp. 74-78). While Linder has only been referenced as the ‘first’ film star by a few academics (including French stardom expert Ginette Vincendeau), Florence Lawrence is placed at the heart of accounts of the emergence of the star system in the US – indeed deCordova devoted several pages to her. A piece of publicity for Lawrence, masterminded by IMP’s Carl Laemmle, was particularly audacious: an advertisement titled ‘We Nail Lie’ was published in the trade press on 5 March 1910 and claimed to be denying reports, spread by its ‘enemies’, that Lawrence had been killed in a street-car accident. Shail thoroughly examines Lawrence’s earlier, though patchier, publicity in the trade press, citing an advertisement for Harry Solter’s *Lest We Forget* in December 1909 (which deCordova also referenced). While Shail expands his search to other materials and uncovers portrait photographs etc, these too are from late 1909. The dates are significant for Shail since he strikingly claims, despite acknowledging that his work on Linder and Lawrence is only ‘pieced together’ from incomplete records (p. 61), that Linder’s September 1909 campaign *caused* Lawrence’s. This was either direct, as Laemmle was visiting Europe at the right time to have seen Linder’s publicity (p. 139), or indirect, since the US film industry in general, though perhaps not as an amorphous mass, was attempting to overcome France’s dominance (p. 147).

Furthermore, Shail claims that Linder and Lawrence had an important factor in common: they both played ongoing characters in films series. Part Two of the book persuasively argues that the number of series characters increased in mid-1910 and remained at a consistent level until at least late 1912 (Fig. 5.18; p. 212). Shail subsequently provides a table which compares the functional equivalence of such series characters with ‘real’ stars – at times quoting theorists such as McDonald (Fig. 6.11; pp. 296-299). He asserts that ‘most’ of the functions of stardom are served by the fictional series character (p. 295) and implies that this undermines what he perceives to be the star studies focus on the private life. In his final chapter, ‘The Ontology of Film Stardom’, Shail therefore attempts to replace what he considers to be ‘a common scholarly model of film stardom’ which separates out the genuine (the real self which star studies scholars claim cannot be known), the covert (extra-

filmic), and the overt (fictional roles) (Fig. 7.4; p. 358) with a 'new model of film stardom'. Shail's model positions the film star's private (or genuine) self at the lowest end of a scale which measures the degree of fictionalisation, while the extra-filmic public self, and especially fiction film roles, are placed towards the 'overt' end of the scale (Fig. 7.5; p. 361). Much of this seems to rely on a philosophical point about whether audiences view coverage about the 'real' life of stars as openly fictional (overt) or are deceived by it (the coverage is covert). While this helpfully reminds us that the public is not always credulous, it is a late return to the star definition first addressed in the introduction. This ambitious book appears to have two separate, if related, projects. The first is Part One, 'a new run at the story', which challenges deCordova in terms of the very early days of the film star system in the US by highlighting the importance of Linder, and claiming a causal link with Lawrence. The second, Part Two, is 'another run at the story' which proposes the importance of the fictional series character to the way we view *all* stars, regardless of their temporal or geographic context. However, it is unclear, at least to me, how we distinguish the overt from the covert and what this would mean for the study of stars.

We must, after all, consider academic works on stars in the context of the field both past and present. Martin Shingler and Lindsay Steenberg's article in the special issue of *Celebrity Studies* was arrestingly titled 'Star studies in mid-life crisis'. While it is necessary to query star studies (as Shail does, selectively, in relation to deCordova) it is notable that ultimately Shingler and Steenberg concluded that the essays published in the issue (many of them about contemporary stars) demonstrated that established theorists, including Dyer, continue to be relevant – even in an age when celebrities populate social media.[9] Following established star studies, McDonald's *George Clooney* provides valuable insights specific to Clooney – he embodies 'cool' – as well as to Hollywood from the mid-1990s to the mid-2010s. Consulting works on other stars (including in the BFI star series, particularly those on Kidman, Washington, and so on) further contextualises assertions made about one star – being 'cool' may be important to more stars than Clooney, and others, like Clooney, may negotiate politics by the Ordinary/Extraordinary paradox. McDonald also comments on how Clooney relates to other stars – the *Ocean's* franchise he identifies as especially important to the Clooney brand not only has an ensemble nature but recalls the 'ratpack' from Hollywood's past. Like star studies scholars, stars from various temporal and geographic contexts

interact with one another; this area seems especially ripe for investigation as we further attempt to ‘reinvigorate and reinvent’ star studies.

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Notes

- [1] ‘Where is the Star?’, Volume 10, Issue 4, October 2019.
- [2] Dyer 1998, p. 43.
- [3] *Ibid.*, p. 20.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- [5] deCordova 1990, p. 31.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
- [7] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- [8] *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- [9] Shingler & Steenberg 2019, p. 448.