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Revisiting Star Studies (12-14 June 2013, Newcastle University)

Šárka Gmitterková

Conferences primarily dedicated to stars and stardom do not come around on a regular basis. Newcastle University organised an event on the ever-expanding field of star studies, in cooperation with the Center for Film and Digital Media at the University of Sunderland. Despite its low-key character, the conference attracted some 70 delegates from 12 countries and welcomed high-profile keynote speakers.

The main question the organisers' aimed to answer in the opening remarks was why star studies need to be revisited. The number of books dedicated to this topic has not declined; quite the contrary, this critical and theoretical paradigm seems to be firmly rooted in film studies departments – and not just there, as was obvious from the example of the hosting university where papers and theses based on this method appear frequently in the broader field of humanities (e.g. linguistics, territorial studies, sociology). This phenomenon of the accessibility of star studies outside the realm of film history and theory has an easy explanation. Stardom, being a transgressive, multimedia, and transnational concept, communicates well with various other ways of understanding social reality and national history. In the case of this conference, inspiring papers were presented reflecting on stardom from a number of perspectives: specific actors as embodiments of industrial trends; the performative aspect of star images; national stars and their specificity versus connectivity with other popular names; and an interdisciplinary examination of particular aspects of stardom such as the voice, aging, whiteness, or fandom.

It was obvious from a quick glance at the programme that the above statement seems to be true mostly for British research centres. As the majority of books published on stardom are of British or American origin, the organisers of Revisiting Star Studies aimed to open this area to new countries and subsequent issues, topics, and names. Therefore, the conference programme also reflected the thematic range of books in which researchers focus on Bollywood and Asian cinemas. However, not much work has been done on Central and Eastern European, Latin American, and African stardom. Despite bringing heightened attention to topics usually left at the margins of contemporary star studies research (Guy Austin on the interconnection between performance, body, and national identity in the Algerian films of Biyouana; Isak Thorsten on Valdemar Psilander, the first international star of the silent era; the keynote by Stephanie Dennison on the Brazilian star Xuxa, to name but a few), the main problem of the national versus the transnational lies in the methodological area. Are current methodological tools based on Richard Dyer's influential study *Stars* and its numerous reappropriations applicable for analysing local rather than 'glocal'² modes of stardom? Or, do we always have to

adjust these terms to fit specific historical, social, and ideological factors and discourses? We can reformulate the question: is it even possible nowadays to speak of national film stardom when transnational modes of this phenomenon are prevalent and pervasive?

As many papers presented in Newcastle made clear, the basic taxonomy can be used globally, but with a local twist. Bollywood can serve as a perfect example. In Neepa Majumdar's keynote speech 'Listening to Stardom: Considerations of Voice in Star Studies', this particular cinema was presented as not only heavily dependent on the dubbing of international hits (especially those labeled as family entertainment), but probably as the only star system in the world allowing the coexistence of two stars in one body/star image. Therefore, in the case of Bollywood, star voices serve as the glue that holds various presences together. The physical star has a star persona in the traditional sense of the term (as an amalgam of screen image and private identity, resulting in an easily-identifiable commodity) but shares screen presence with the singer voicing his or her parts. While in Hollywood the dislocation of voice from image was hidden from the public (for example, in the case of Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* [1964]), in India the acoustic and physical performers, despite their separate identities, share fan attention for a single part. Plus, as Hanna Klien demonstrated in her paper 'When Stars Gaze Back: Dharshan as a Concept of Stardom and Spectatorship', Bollywood cinema is largely structured through the concept of darshan: an exchange of glances between the devotee and the deity in worship. While its impact has been identified in Indian film studies years ago, we should ask how darshan is currently negotiated when Bollywood stars such as Shah Rukh Khan go global.

Another fruitful area of research was the search for interconnections between stardom and images of ageing. Maturing is a question of values given to particular phenomena oscillating between extremes – authenticity versus inauthentic, gracefulness versus vulgarity, success versus failure – depending on the context of a given national culture, star brand, social group, etc. The topic of ageing provided enough material for the construction of two panels, where both the positive and negative values attached to ageing could be scrutinised. This phenomenon never really worked well with stardom of the classical era, despite some exceptions. This was explained by Linda Berkvens, who focused on Barbara Stanwyck's late career, which was built around values such as wisdom and maturity, thus creating a unique role model for mature women in the 1950s and 1960s. Star images of the classical era survived in fixed and stable terms, while famous actors emerging in the 1980s had to negotiate their ageing directly in the public eye.

Not surprisingly, ageing is valued differently in terms of gender. While male actors can age gracefully and even gain physical attractiveness (George Clooney, Sean Connery, et al), actresses usually lack stimulating professional opportunities

and therefore desperately try to prolong their youthful star image. However, this strict division is no longer clear, as new genres, new forms of star power in the overall process of film production, and new methods of spreading the star's fame have emerged in the last three decades. The cultural narrative of ageing describes it in terms of success, which lies in the responsible treatment of star bodies with surrounding discourses on training, proper nutrition, and healthy lifestyles. As apparent from some of the papers, the action genre is particularly loaded with images of successful male ageing. As discussed by Lisa Purse in her paper 'Confronting the Impossibility by Impossible Bodies', Tom Cruise as an ageing action star brought attention to various methods through which this popular genre confronts the reality of the first generation of action stars getting old. One of the latest methods of negotiation is intensive nostalgia, manifesting itself in multiple returns to 1980s action stars, or pairing an ageing action star with the less experienced or younger co-star (*Rambo* [2008], *The Expendables* [2010]; *Die Hard* [2007], *Looper* [2012]). Among such prevailing generic patterns, Cruise secures his unique and complex star persona in his mature roles while minimising the visible aspects of ageing.

Female ageing is described through a different set of terms, with the emphasis on an acceptable rather than successful process. Securing a visible spot among Hollywood's best is usually achieved through connections with quality acting. Kirsty Fairclough's paper on Meryl Streep demonstrated how this particular actress gained her unique status as part of the classical Hollywood canon. Talent protects Streep from making the wrong career decisions (despite her preference for lighter genres in the past few years) and also gives her the courage to embrace the inevitable ageing process. The ability to act does serve as a sort of guarantee against chasing the wrong values, such as clinging to a youthful image. Instead, stars such as Streep, Helen Mirren, or Judy Dench provide their audience with a sense of relatable beauty and class.

The positively valued images of wise and attractive ageing were followed by the complete opposite, and instead of discourses on acting and cinema bodily aspects related to vulgarity and excess prevailed. In the case of Melanie Griffith, analyzed by Lucy Bolton, the problem of disgraceful ageing lies in the complicated history of her body image. Griffith was always presented as cheap and artificial due to many factors. She was often compared to her more delicate mother, Tippi Hedren, and her star image was the result of the unbelievable combination of a voluptuous body and a childish, high-pitched voice – plus knowledge about her off-screen life, especially plastic surgeries. Griffith thus serves not only as an instructive case of ageing taking a wrong turn in Hollywood but also as an embodiment of multiple ways of long-term survival in the public eye. The analysis of Gerard Depardieu focused on the latest transformation of his star image (from French patriot to accepting Russian citizenship due to tax evasion). He has been treated

very harshly by the press and the critical reception of his latest roles reflects his once powerful masculinity being in crisis. However, as Sue Harris demonstrated, these culturally-impooverished figures reflect not only on the drastic changes of Depardieu himself but also on the broader shift concerning working class male identity in contemporary France being at the margins and losing all potential for meaningful rebellion. Overall, this topic of ageing stars reflected the fact that textual analysis still remains at the core of the star studies approach. Discovering and deconstructing concrete values and meanings hidden behind the everyday omnipresence of star personas still dominates the field. Production and industrial trend analyses appeared in the conference programme as well, such as considering stars' online profiles, or the industrial contexts of stardom in a given national culture. However, these remained the exception.

The area of star ageing may therefore serve as an ideal demonstration of the dominant critical paradigm used in this area of film theory. From the methodological perspective, Newcastle welcomed keynote speeches as well as some inspiring papers introducing the infusion of star studies with performance studies. These two approaches share an interest in the actor's persona, his or her screen presence, and what constitutes an actor's labor. Performance is not limited to stardom, as every actor develops and uses a special set of gestures and dialects. Still, star performance remains an under-researched area in star studies. Understanding star images only in the form of the sum of multiple and definite meanings that they contain may be quite limiting. How do we distinguish and describe good or bad acting (especially against common prejudices that stars cannot act), and what kind of material do we have to take into account?

Pam Cook's keynote dedicated to Nicole Kidman's artful acting clearly stated that instead of misjudging Kidman's histrionic and artificial performing we should ask different questions – whether her shift from naturalism to postmodern pastiche could be perceived as a logical step in her growth from national (i.e. Australian) to transnational fame, and whether and how her performative ability demonstrates itself not only in films but also in other public appearances. Yingjin Zhang's keynote presented another point of view on these methodological crossover problematics. Instead of speaking about star image as a form consisting of structured polysemy, Zhang offers the idea of conjunctural polysemy. This perspective introduces this key term not through the usual relation between signification and interpretation but rather opens star studies to performance studies emphasis on liveness, interactivity, and alteration. The vital combination of star studies and performance theoretisation worked particularly well in the area of nontraditional stardom. On a panel dedicated to various modes of stardom at the margins, performance aspects served as the ultimate ratification of star status – whether demonstrated

by animals as star vehicles in Hollywood and non-Hollywood cinema or examining the alternative economy of porn stardom.

The presentation of a BFI book series edited by Martin Shingler and Susan White made it evident that stardom offers fertile ground for further research. The editors plan to publish 100 titles dedicated to scrutinising multiple facets of stardom. To date five books have been published from the most prominent stardom theorists and historians – Ginette Vincendeau on Brigitte Bardot, Pam Cook on Nicole Kidman, Susan White on Elisabeth Taylor, Lisa Shaw on Carmen Miranda, and Andrew Klevan on Barbara Stanwyck – including a critical guide to the method by Shingler that introduces the main issues in the field. In a few years time we may have a unique range of titles spanning from the silent era to the contemporary period, covering stardom in international cinema and understanding the diverse elements of this phenomenon, such as child and adult fame, the recycling and interpreting of star images by different cultures and fan groups, and the industrial managing of stardom.

Revisiting Star Studies helped to discover previously neglected areas for research (new localities, ageing, star fan bases reshaped by social networks, the dominance of transnational fame), reshaping the critical paradigm by accentuating the need to focus on production and industrial trends while analyzing stardom and presenting other analytical methods (mostly from performance studies). As such, this conference points to stardom being one of the most viable concepts of the cinematic institution, always adapting to technological, production-based, and social changes.

Notes

1. Professor Guy Austin, Director of the Research Centre in Film and Digital Media and Director of Research at the School of Modern Languages in Newcastle, and Dr Sabrina Yu, Head of East Asian Studies in Newcastle.
2. The term 'glocal' is a combination of global and local. It could be summed up as 'think global, act local'. The convergence of the terms express multiple connections or relationships between global and local problems, businesses, practices, politics, etc. When applied to stardom it characterises the shift from a locally-rooted acting career to a global star brand, as for example with the cases of Penelope Cruz, Marion Cotillard, Audrey Tatou, Russel Crowe, and others.

About the author

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