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Female celebrity and ageing in the limelight and under the microscope

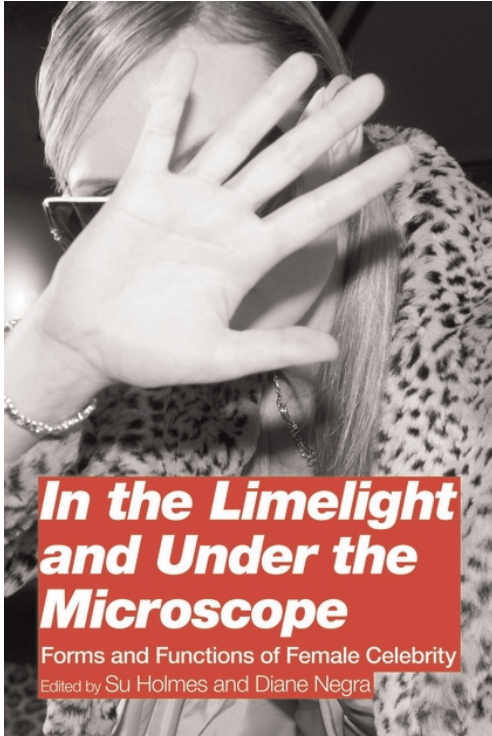
Julie Lobalzo Wright

Female celebrity is policed, under surveillance, and interrogated within contemporary culture, illuminating the gendering of not only celebrity but fame in general. There are political, historical, and social implications to this gendering of fame which are explored within celebrity studies – an area of film and media studies which continues to expand in new directions. The establishment of the journal *Celebrity Studies* in 2010 and its bi-annual conference, recently held in June 2014 at Royal Holloway, University of London, indicates the position of the journal as an authority on the academic subject of celebrity. This is further evidenced by

the recent collection of essays edited by Deborah Jermyn and based on a special issue of *Celebrity Studies*, titled *Female Celebrity and Ageing: Back in the Spotlight* (London-New York: Routledge, 2014).¹ Although focused on ageing this collection explores similar territory as *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity* (New York-London: Continuum, 2011), edited by Su Holmes and Diane Negra. In fact, the use of the words 'limelight' and 'spotlight' in both titles implies how visual, transparent, and observable female celebrity *is* and *has been* since the turn of the last century. The focus on female celebrity is nothing new, but the omnipresence of celebrities, celebrity media, and cultural commentators has thrown female celebrities 'back into the spotlight'. Thus, both collections approach the contemporary period as a window into key debates in celebrity studies while also considering how the contemporary post-feminist, neoliberal culture informs celebrity discourses.

The area of celebrity studies continues to distinguish itself from its predecessor star studies through its interdisciplinary explorations into various subjects. Although Holmes and Negra quote Graeme Turner in their introduction, who suggests that celebrity is 'not yet a truly interdisciplinary enterprise' (p. 15), both books help forge the 'tighter links between up-to-the-minute theoretical work on gender and historical and contemporary sites of female celebrity' (p. 15). This highlights the discipline's precarious position as an emerging subject area focused on individuals whose fame can last less than the 15 minutes Andy Warhol proposed we would all experience. It is not just the theoretical work that is contemporary but also the celebrity case studies and the culture they exist within. In addition, celebrities are experienced, consumed, and communicated in new and divergent ways, including the proliferation of Internet gossip sites. These factors can often lead scholars (and the public) to argue for the 'newness' of celebrity.

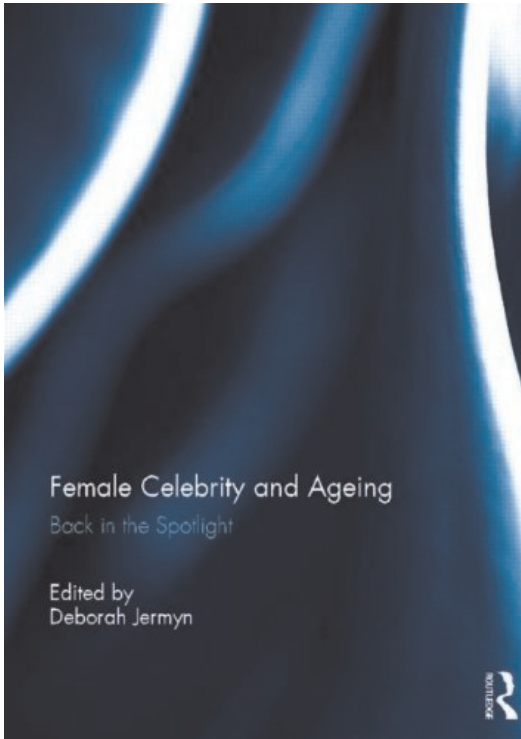
Both books tackle this issue head on by mapping historical continuities in female celebrity in order to, as Holmes and Negra put it, 'more precisely and accurately delineate "new" and "old" phenomena' (p. 18). Of note are essays by Abigail Salerno ('Helen Keller, Hollywood and Political Celebrity') and April Miller ('Bloody Blondes and Bobbed-Haired Bandits: The Execution of Justice and the Construction of the Celebrity Criminal in the 1920s Popular Press') in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* and Emily Carman ("Women Rule Hollywood": Ageing and Freelance Stardom in the Studio System') in *Female Celebrity and Ageing* for work that explores enduring notions of female celebrity often ignored because they took place long before the contemporary era. Catherine Hidson begins *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* with a fascinating essay concerning Lillie Langtry ("Mrs. Langtry Seems to Be on the Way to a Fortune": The Jersey Lily and Models of Late Nineteenth-Century Fame') who, according to Hidson, was a 'style icon and *the*



female celebrity of her day' (p. 17), challenging Richard Schickel's notion that 'there was no such thing as celebrity prior to the beginning of the twentieth century' (p. 19). Hidson argues many of the debates about contemporary female celebrity can be traced to this historical era when Langtry, through her beauty, infamy, and success, unsettled dominant ideologies of femininity, revealing a 'tension surrounding women, financial independence, business acumen and celebrity' (p. 27).

As Hidson's essay postulates, female celebrity is often concentrated on the body, whether as a site of beauty, as is the case with Langtry, or as a compromised, transgressive, or abhorrent site. It is not surprising that the body is central to many of the essays in *Female Celebrity and Ageing*, as ageing female bodies are particularly vulnerable to the hyper-scrutiny of female celebrity, presenting images of ageing that can be, as Jermyn noted, 'hopeful and newly affirming one moment, and destructive and retrograde the next' (p. 12). Susan Smith ('Get Off Your Asses for These Old Broads!': Elizabeth Taylor, Ageing and the Television Comeback') and Jermyn ('Glorious, Glamorous, and That Old Standby, "Amorous": The Late Blossoming of Diane Keaton's Romantic Comedy Career') investigate well-known Hollywood stars who made comebacks late in their career, arguing against the common assumption that the entertainment industry reduces ageing women to

demeaning caricatures of their younger (bodily) selves. Keaton is an especially interesting case, as Jermyn suggests, because her performances in ‘mature’ romantic comedies have allowed the star to be perceived as both a desirable and a desiring subject (p. 40) due to her history within the genre and her ‘age-appropriate’ beauty – although even Jermyn concludes her essay by stating ‘the figure of the ageing woman star remains a heavily contested site’ (p. 51).



This sentiment is picked up in other essays in both books, particularly by Kirsty Fairclough in the same collection, who shifts the focus from the ageing body to the gossip industry that is built to profit from the hyper-scrutiny of female celebrity. Fairclough argues that the ‘politics of contemporary celebrity is highly visible through the gossip blog’ (p. 104) because of the emphasis on ageing as something to celebrate and contend with in a post-feminist and neo-liberal society. This creates a relationship between mediated and authentic ageing bodies, with plastic surgery and airbrushed photographs becoming sites to police and interrogate ageing women (Kristyn Gordon and Joanne Garde-Hansen’s essay, ‘From Old Media Whore to New Media Troll: The Online Negotiation of Madonna’s Ageing Body’ in the same collection considers how Madonna’s body is able to ‘pass’ in a youth-oriented culture like popular music). *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope*

also examines this tension in two essays, 'Grotesquerie as Marker of Success in Aging Female Stars' by Anne Morey and 'The Horror of Something to See: Celebrity "Vaginas" as Prosthese' by Margaret Schwartz. Morey, similar to Smith and Jermyn in *Female Celebrity and Ageing*, argues against the dominant ideology that ageing Hollywood actresses in the studio system were cast in grotesque roles. Morey proposes that these actresses, including Bette Davis, were given parts that allowed them to 'dramatize the problems of female celebrity' and 'display their own talents as performers' (p. 107).

What is at stake within these essays is the role of agency within female celebrity. How much of these circumstances are thrust upon female celebrities? How much of a role do these women have within their own celebrity image construction? Quite often, celebrity is considered to be something bestowed onto an individual through infamy or notoriety. The question of achievement – particularly the notion of earning one's stardom – is central to debates surrounding celebrity (noted within Holmes and Negra's introduction). Even the cover photograph of *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* with a glamorous-looking woman wearing sunglasses and a leopard-printed coat, her hand shielding her face from the camera, suggests the intrusive nature of celebrity and the position of the female celebrity as one who is subjected to scrutiny but not able to prevent it. Many of the essays in both books challenge the notion of female celebrities as victims of the system while also acknowledging the difficult position of women as public figures representing contemporary notions of femininity and womanhood.

The strength in both books – but more so in Holmes and Negra, which includes more essays – lies in the vast array of examples that position female celebrities as important indicators of what it is to be a woman in the post-feminist, neo-liberal Western world. Again, value judgments are often bestowed upon female celebrities, with celebrity still considered part of low culture. Kim Allen's essay in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* is an especially important contribution to celebrity discourses because her empirical work explores the common misconceptions behind the public panic over young people's desires to become celebrities ('Girls Imagining Careers in the Limelight: Social Class, Gender and Fantasies of "Success"'). As Allen acknowledges, celebrity contains 'highly classed and gendered discourses which operate to mark out "proper" and "improper" success' (p. 152), finding her interviewees (aged 16-19) engaged with celebrities 'within processes of identity construction that were informed by their gender, class, race, and sexuality' (p. 153). Although there were differing views about specific female celebrities based on these social factors, the interviews suggested that young girls recognised the 'rewards of fame- recognition, autonomy, and economic security' (p. 162), generally praising the hard work and determination that led to celebrity fame. This type of research is vital to celebrity studies, as it moves the analysis from

celebrity texts to the celebrity audience, helping to shed light on not only how celebrity is consumed but what it means within people's everyday lives. As Richard Dyer noted in *Heavenly Bodies*, 'stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people' (p. 17).

Female celebrities act out aspects of life that matter today, particularly the current emphasis on 'family values' (especially in America) and motherhood that Holmes and Negra refer to as 'the preeminent state of achieved femininity' (p. 7). Motherhood is discussed within many of the essays in both books, including Anna Watkins Fisher's ('We Love This Trainwreck! Sacrificing Britney to Save America') exploration in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* of Britney Spears' 'trainwreck' image as archetypal of the impossibility of female celebrities to be both sexual and maternal. Fisher's essay further displays Dyer's ideological contention (quoted above) by arguing that the 'War on Britney' illustrated America's emphasis on excess and failure in the late 2000s, creating a 'national crisis' related to the 'War on Terror'.

Excess and failure also feature in *Female Celebrity and Ageing*, most notably in Brenda R. Weber's 'Reality (Celebrity) Check: Fat, Death and the Ageing Female Body'. Weber argues that Makeover TV, including *The Biggest Loser*, presents 'real women' with the opportunity to claim a position of liberation and empowerment through their weight loss and discovery of the 'real self' hidden beneath the excessive body. As Weber has argued elsewhere,² Makeover TV presents the idea that controlling the 'real' physical body will also help to 'regulate and protect the vulnerable social body' (p. 21). Her essay on *The Biggest Loser* reveals a limitation to the 'reclaimed youth' of the 'real body', with childbirth as a 'primary directive' that can be successfully achieved through the appropriate (thinner, leaner) body (p. 75). Weber's essay indicates there is a shelf-life for these reclaimed bodies, which corresponds to Jermyn's claim in the book's introduction that women are now in a prolonged period of middle age, often precipitated by becoming a mother. As Schwartz argues in her essay in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope*, motherhood alters the female celebrity body, changing how it is viewed through the pressure for women to protect their sexiness while acknowledging the body's function beyond being sexy. This again points to the policed state of female celebrity.

Of the 23 essays included in both collections five openly engaged with questions of diversity. In *Female Celebrity and Ageing*, William Brown explored Charlotte Rampling's transnational stardom and ageing image ('Channel Hopping: Charlotte Rampling in French Cinema of the Early 2000s'). *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope* included Salerno's investigation of Helen Keller's disabled body and political celebrity, Caitlin Yunuen Lewis considered Sofia Coppola as a

white star through her 'cool' postfeminism ('Cool Postfeminism: The Stardom of Sofia Coppola'), Joselyn Leimbach examined the homonormative lesbian identities of television hosts Rachel Maddow and Suze Orman ('Strengthening as They Undermine: Rachel Maddow and Suze Orman's Homonormative Lesbian Identities'), and Candice Haddad discussed the singer M.I.A. as an ethnic, diasporic, and disruptive figure in American popular music culture ('Immigration, Authorship, Censorship, and Terrorism: The Politics of M.I.A.'s US Crossover').

Although all of these essays are welcome additions to celebrity studies they are still mainly focused on Anglo-Saxon celebrity. More work needs to be done on ethnicity, race, and female celebrity. Studies of Bollywood stars have introduced modes of celebrity that offer alternative perspectives from dominant celebrity discourses. Recent work by Sreya Mitra³ on the transnational stardom of Shilpa Shetty and Susan Dewey's essay⁴ exploring the gendered body of Miss India illustrate how female bodies are codified differently throughout the world, with female Bollywood bodies, as Mitra has argued, exposed to comparisons with traditionally 'ideal' and 'dignified' images of Indian womanhood (p. 192). In fact, Dewey's essay appears in an excellent book that explores how mediated images of women throughout Asia, including celebrities, impact upon modes of identity and individualism for women in Asia.⁵ Although the two books reviewed here offer less cultural diversity, the variety of essays, particularly *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope*, demonstrates the interdisciplinary work currently being undertaken in celebrity studies (it was especially pleasing to see two essays, Brown's and Fisher's, exploring the connections between philosophy and stardom, an area that is sorely under-researched).

Overall both books are rich and detailed, examining female celebrity through various historical, social, and political contexts. As noted, the case studies present a range of examples through contemporary and historical media contexts, offering convincing arguments for the fraught nature of female celebrity as a cultural phenomenon. Although alluded to throughout both collections, men are generally missing. As Holmes and Negra suggest, this is due to the 'stark differences in the contemporary treatment of male and female celebrities' (p. 1). Fisher's essay should be signaled out for tackling the connections between Britney Spears and George W. Bush and examining male celebrity through the former President. The essay, while one of the most interesting in *In the Limelight and Under the Microscope*, concentrated more on Spears' image during the Bush years as opposed to interrogating his own celebrity. The relative absence of men illustrates that these most recent publications, while focusing on the 'gendering of fame', are missing the fruitful and productive explorations that direct comparisons between the sexes could lead to, including productive dialogues that may further celebrity, feminist, and media discourses.

Notes

1. Nine of the ten essays were published within the special issue and reprinted in this volume, with one additional essay previously published in another journal.
2. Weber 2009.
3. Mitra 2013.
4. Dewey 2012.
5. See Kim 2012.

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Film festival management and programming

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St Andrews Film Studies publishes the book series Films Need Festivals, Festivals Need Films under the editorship of Dina Iordanova. The series is now in its 6th edition in as many years, with the two newest being *Coming Soon to a Festival Near You: Programming Film Festivals* edited by Jeffrey Ruoff (St Andrews Film Studies, 2012) and *Sustainable Projections: Concepts in Film Festival Management* written by Alex Fischer (St Andrews Film Studies, 2013).

Rouff's is a somewhat traditional – if a tradition can already be said to exist for film festival studies – mixed bag of essays, interviews, diaries, and theoretical reflections assembled into one discursive volume. This positions it within the lineage of Richard Porton's capital anthology *Dekalog 3: On Film Festivals* (Wallflower Press, 2009), which features a heavy-hitting line-up of writer/curators like