

The Birth of Stars

About: Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, Princeton University Press

By Alain Chenu

Our interest in celebrities is a major structuring element of contemporary societies. According to Sharon Marcus “stars” appeared in the 19th century in theatre, and the case of Sarah Bernhardt allows us to characterise the type of interaction that arises between the media, publics and celebrities.

The literary genre of celebrity studies in the Anglo-Saxon world has no exact equivalent in continental Europe. As this discipline is a part of cultural studies, its approach to the phenomenon of celebrity is framed within the study of modern popular cultures; it sees mass media as both an essential object of analysis (since they play a decisive role in the construction of celebrity) and an important documentary resource. A good overview of this research tradition can be found in *The Celebrity Culture Reader*, edited by P. David Marshall (Routledge, 2006). This work contains a republication of Leo Lowenthal’s seminal article “The Triumph of Mass Idols”, written in 1943, which forms a link between the works of the Frankfurt School and cultural studies.

In *The Drama of Celebrity*, Sharon Marcus, a specialist in 19th-century British and French literary cultures and a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University in New York, intends to develop a new theory of celebrity culture. She considers that celebrity, in the sense that interests her, is constructed through a triangular interaction between publics, the media and celebrities. She agrees with Antoine Lilti (*The Invention of Celebrity*, Polity, 2017), stating that this interaction emerged during the Age of Enlightenment, accompanied by growing recognition of every individual’s right to protest in the public space. Marcus’ study revolves around the theory that the different parties involved (the media, publics and celebrities) have their own powers, making the development of the “drama of celebrity” unpredictable, since it is based on a play of alliance and opposition between the different

points of this triangle. In this respect, Marcus deviates from the Frankfurt School's belief that the cultural industries tend to shape celebrity careers and public taste as they wish.

Covering around two centuries of contemporary history, Sharon Marcus mainly draws on two types of documents. On the media side, she uses digitised magazine collections that allow her to characterise the media's treatment of celebrities. On the public side, she uses scrapbooks: albums of press clippings, autographs, and photographs put together by fans (her major source is the scrapbook collection of the Ohio State University's Theatre Research Institute, or TRI). In both cases, she analyses both images and texts.

The celebrities/media/publics triangle

The work is divided into eight chapters corresponding to eight keywords that help to define the properties and configurations of the interactions between celebrities, the media and publics.

1. *Defiance*: celebrities can embody the breaking of certain social rules. Their publics may support them in this, by distancing themselves from the more conformist points of view expressed in the media.

2. *Sensation*: the media and publics describe celebrities as capable of generating thrill and delight.

3. *Savagery*: publics may show their enthusiasm by engaging in violent, sometimes uncontrolled behaviours, which are deliberately stigmatised and exaggerated in the media.

4. *Intimacy*: fans put together scrapbooks, collecting autographs and objects linked to celebrities; they maintain an asymmetrical relationship in which they seek closeness with stars, without reciprocity.

5. *Multiplication*: Walter Benjamin stated that the mass reproduction of a work of art destroyed its aura ("The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", 1936-1955). Marcus, however, believes that the more widely circulated a celebrity's image, the stronger their halo of distinction.

6. *Imitation*: the tastes and lifestyles of celebrities are emulated by their publics, who seek (with varying degrees of success) to display their resemblance with their models.

7. *Judgement*: when it comes to evaluating the qualities of celebrities, publics and journalists have specific expertise.

8. *Merit*: celebrities are in competition with each other and are subject to comparative evaluations of their merits.

Marcus shows that the “drama of celebrity” acquired its modern constituent characteristics during the 19th century, in theatre. She sees Sarah Bernhardt as the “godmother of modern celebrity culture” (p. 14) and “the biggest star of the 19th century” (p. 131). Over the chapters, she deepens her analysis of this emblematic case. Sarah Bernhardt embodied several challenges: she was a woman, she was Jewish, she was sexually liberated, she successfully rebelled against the men and the institutions (such as the Théâtre Français) who wanted to exercise authority over her, and she was the first actress to achieve global fame. Elvis Presley, Madonna, Marilyn Monroe and many other celebrities in the showbusiness world, as well as certain members of other spheres (Oscar Wilde, Princess Diana, Davy Crockett, Donald Trump, etc.) are also analysed, but in less detail.

A culture of the image

This well-written and well-edited book draws on ample, original and interesting documentation on the history of theatre. One of its strengths is its analysis of images as well as texts. The book contains almost a hundred figures showing drawings or photographs. In the 19th century, the emergence of photography revolutionised the possibilities of identifying people by recognising their faces. Marcus notes that before 1850, the various portraits of a celebrity (whether they were drawn, painted or sculpted) did not always look alike, meaning that the public would not necessarily be able to tell whether they represented the same person (p. 132). In the following decades, the manual intervention of line engravers was still required to turn photographs into printed documents (with varying degrees of talent). It was not until around 1900 that new industrial methods allowed a good printed transposition of the contours and different nuances of grey in a photograph, thus making it easier for large segments of the public to recognise a celebrity’s face. This led to stronger personalisation of the connection between celebrities and their publics. Other industrial developments (such as railways, steamships and printing techniques) created the possibility of fame on an unprecedented scale, paving the way for growing inequality of income in the cultural industries, the sale of merchandise, etc.

Questionable conventions and methods

There are certain points that the book could have explored in more detail. For example, there is insufficient explanation of the principles behind the selection of certain works and articles out of the huge corpus of documents relating to celebrities, and we are not

told the methods used to compile the Ohio State University's scrapbook collection. There also seems to be an implicit choice not to study the influence of celebrities after their death. Shakespeare, for example, is often evoked, particularly because Sarah Bernhardt played Macbeth. Clearly, he is a celebrity in the theatrical world, and it would have been worth explaining why his case is not studied. After all, a celebrity's influence continues after their death.

The final two chapters (which Marcus herself states are most likely to be controversial) remain rather allusive about the types of judgement applied to celebrities and the ways in which we recognise their merit. These are not the same in theatre (or more generally in art or showbusiness) as they are in other spheres: Bonaparte's fame is based on the Battles of Arcole and Waterloo, that of Obama and Trump on major electoral events in the USA, that of Mohamed Ali on world boxing championships, that of Diana on her marriage to the Prince of Wales and their subsequent divorce, etc. The diversity of these performances and the identification of their points in common are worthy of deeper analysis.

The specific role of the various modern media could also have been better explained, and Marcus perhaps overestimates it. It is worth remembering that Louis XVI of France was arrested in Varennes because his effigy featured on money: a very old means of mass communication and of constructing celebrity. Just as modern celebrity culture is largely a culture of images based on the circulation of photographs and the broadcasting of films, a king's fame was constructed through coins, stained glass windows and monumental statues. These modes of representation, both old and modern, are accessible to publics with low literacy levels and can transcend the divides between high and popular cultures. In a way, the Enlightenment deepened these divides, due to the importance it gave to the circulation of written documents. The celebrity epitomised by Sarah Bernhardt was new not only because it was based on the circulation of images, but also because of a combination of transformations affecting the media, forms of individuality, markets for cultural goods and services, political structures and gender relations. *The Drama of Celebrity* only partly explores the particularities of these interdependencies.

It would also be helpful if the book gave more information about the other types of culture that exist in contrast to that of celebrity. The media tackle many subjects without referring to any particular person: they may focus on institutions like the Théâtre Français or the Actors Studio, or think in terms of common nouns by addressing key themes like auteur theory or the differences between tragedy and comedy. The scope of the analysis in the book is limited to contemporary celebrities. This makes it impossible to characterise how the place of celebrity culture relative to other cultures has evolved.

Tacit borrowing from sociological and ethnomethodological works

The book could have been improved by a more explicit acknowledgement of its convergence with approaches that are more sociological than they are historical or literary. Marcus observes that the format of a celebrity photograph differs depending on whether it is published in a magazine or cut out and stuck into an album by a fan who, seeking greater closeness with the person pictured, includes their portrait in the equivalent of a family album. She does not mention what this reflection on the related notions of format and information framing owes to David Altheide (*An Ecology of Communication. Cultural Formats of Control*, Aldine, 1976). The view that fans and journalists are not cultural dopes, and the interest in observing breaches of the rules of ordinary social life (Sarah Bernhardt's speciality) follow the same line of thought as Harold Garfinkel's *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Prentice Hall, 1967). There is much overlap between the descriptors used for celebrity and those used for religion: Sarah Bernhardt was described as "divine", Marcus refers to her "halo" and calls her "sublime", while she describes Oscar Wilde as a "gay martyr" (p. 27). It is impossible not to think of the notion of charisma, but Max Weber's name does not appear in the index, and the analysis of the similarities and differences between the cult of celebrities and that of saints and martyrs is taken no further. The vast amount of literature on the themes of imitation and distinction also goes unmentioned. Presumably, Sharon Marcus is familiar with most of these references. Perhaps making them explicit might have made her appear less anchored in the literary discipline, but it would have made the originality of her contribution more apparent.

Overall, the subject is a vast one, and we are left wishing the author had developed it further. Nevertheless, her work is a notable contribution to research on the role of the media and celebrities in structuring contemporary societies.

Reviewed: Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity*, Princeton University Press, 2019, 318 pages, \$29.95.

First published in laviedesidees.fr, 27 December 2019.

Translated from the French by Tiam Goudarzi.

Published in booksandideas.net, 16 January 2020.

