

***In the Limelight and Under the Microscope: Forms and Functions of Female Celebrity*, edited by Diane Negra and Su Holmes, London: Continuum, 2011, 352 pp., £19:99 paperback, ISBN 978-0-8264-3855-3**

The meaning and significance of celebrity in the modern world is a topic of burgeoning debate and critical engagement: aspects that particularly provoke vocal – and often scornful – reactions are the ‘celebritization’ of news and politics, and the ascription of fame to ordinary individuals who have become (and maintain being) ‘famous for being famous’ rather than because of special achievement or exceptional ability in a particular career path. This is, therefore, just the right moment for increased academic interest in popular fame. The journal *Celebrity Studies* was founded in 2010 (by one of the co-editors of the volume under review), and the international and cross-cultural relevance of the subject was demonstrated in the same year with the publication of *Celebrity in China* (co-edited by Louise Edwards and Elaine Jeffreys, and published by the Hong Kong University Press). The achievement of *In the Limelight* is to relate celebrity studies to critical gender studies, drawing on case-studies from the UK and the USA.

The book’s juxtapositions show that the fame of female celebrities has been deployed in a variety of ways, and ascribed meanings that are either exemplary or cautionary. In the former category, the late Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr has found new posthumous fame as a role-model for girls interested in technology, based on her war-time invention of a Secret Communications System. In the latter, we have female stars whose private lives (and, in some cases, professional performances) have collapsed into ‘train-wreck’ chaos: ‘One reason why stories of professionally accomplished/personally troubled female celebrities circulate so actively is that when women struggle or fail, their actions are seen to constitute ‘proof’ that for women the ‘work–life balance’ is really an impossible one’ (2). Of course, there is also media fascination with troubled behaviour by male stars, but scandals ‘characteristically (though not inevitably) fortify conventional understandings of gender, age, class, sexuality, and race/ethnicity’ (3). Hedonistic excess by male stars is read as an expression of ‘essential’ masculinity’ (203); by contrast, the singer Britney Spears is abused by sections of the public in sexualized terms (‘whore’, 320) for her perceived failings as a performer and as a mother. One article argues that Spears’ image ‘came to represent a larger threat to the structuring principles of American national identity’ (330), and that ‘as a target for misplaced public hostility’ (329) she served as distraction from critical scrutiny of George W. Bush during setbacks in the Iraq war.

The subjects of *In the Limelight* range from Lily Langtry (a former royal mistress who became a stage actress in the late nineteenth-century) to the singer MIA; the book is organized roughly chronologically, and there are no wider thematic groupings of chapters. Singing and acting remain the most active sites for the generation celebrity status; there is a chapter on Mia Farrow in the context of the social changes of the 1960s, and an analysis of the ‘cool postfeminist’ aesthetic of Sofia Coppola. In the case of MIA, the essay charts how the contemporary Sri Lankan-born British rapper has transitioned her politically controversial public persona into the American mainstream.

However, other forms of celebrity are also given consideration. A chapter on Helen Keller discusses how she used public fascination with her physical disabilities to promote political causes, while an essay on the television presenters

Suze Orman and Rachel Maddow explores how their public presentation of their lesbian sexualities relies on 'homonormative, postfeminist, and neoliberal conventions' (253). Another chapter draws attention to Ruth Synder, who can be fairly described as a 'celebrity "murderess"' (66), and whose execution by electric chair in 1928 provided newspapers with a dramatic (surreptitiously taken) front-page photograph. Other essays take a thematic approach: there are chapters on the older actress as a 'grotesque', on discourses of mental distress in the memoirs of British female celebrities in the context of 1990s 'pop-feminism', and on the meanings of the '2007 "flashing" fad among young female celebrities in Hollywood' (224). The reception and consumption of celebrity culture are also given their due, as well as the meaning of the desire for fame.

In the case of Langtry, the chapter author notes that her success, and public criticism of it, show that 'the concerns of our mid-Victorian ancestors remain – in many ways – peculiarly familiar today' (35). However, while the analysis here is solid and convincing, it does not surprise. Similarly, it is unremarkable to observe that the media generation of high-profile women criminals in the 1920s 'threatened many long-held stereotypes about the female subject' (78). However, some chapters urge us to reconsider commonplace assumptions about fame. An empirical study of young women on performing arts courses argues that 'the image of young female "wannabe" has psycho-pathological undertones, where girls' desires to become celebrities are read as deluded fantasies in need of correction. These debates do not capture the complexity of young women's relationship with contemporary celebrity' (150). Similarly, it would be easy to regard the performances of older female actresses in grotesque roles (most memorably, Bette Davis in the film *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*) as 'self-travesty or feminist false consciousness', but such roles in fact allow actresses 'to dramatize the problems of female celebrity' and to 'display their talents as performers' (107).

The relationship between celebrity and postfeminism underpins much of the book's analysis; several essays draw on Angela McRobbie's work on postfeminism and popular culture, and postfeminism is the most extensively indexed theoretical term in the book. Postfeminism is interrelated with pop-feminism, which marked 'the popularization and commodification of seemingly feminist sentiments regarding the empowerment... of young women in the West' (200). In 1990s Britain, this pop-feminism was most memorably enacted in the way the Spice Girls pop group was marketed as representing 'Girl Power'. The 'playful sexuality' of the group was set against more traditional (and, many would argue, more substantive) forms of feminism, which was undermined and even sometimes explicitly repudiated in dismissively clichéd terms: 'bar-burning lesbians', in the words of group member Geri Halliwell. A few years later, memoirs by Halliwell and other members of her milieu have tended to 'self-pathologize' their pasts, with accounts of eating disorders and addiction formulated as 'penitent tales of "unfeminine" sin and "feminine" regret' (221). Contemporary female celebrity can thus be situated in relation to a 'postfeminist backlash'. Postfeminism is also used to describe Sofia Coppola, whose 'girlish' persona 'dismantles and diffuses the potential threat of her status as a female director-as-star' (196).

This is part of a wider debate about 'Girl Power', which has been discussed in relation to Taiwan by Fran Martin. Martin draws on the analysis of Catherine Driscoll, who sees 'Girl Power' as a potentially positive formulation that is

sometimes devalued because of its mainstream positioning. Martin, in her essay 'Feminist Girls, Lesbian Comrades' (in Jennifer Helgren and Colleen Vasconcellos, *Girlhood: a Global History*, 2010, and based in part on earlier articles), discusses the Mandopop singer Sandee Chan in the context of 'Spice Girls fever across the East Asian region' (91). She notes that 'the rise of girl rock in Taiwan is inherently linked to transnational cultural flows and the globalization of musical girl cultures. One particularly interesting way in which this happens is in the local reworking of globalizing discourses of pop feminism and "girl power"' (90).

In the Limelight demonstrates the creative potential of critical gender studies in relation to celebrity studies. Read in conjunction with Martin's essay, we can glimpse how the fields of enquiry which the book opens up might be applied fruitfully to East Asia in general, and to Taiwan in particular.

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***Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation*, by Gerardine Meaney, Abingdon: Routledge, 2011, 252pp., £33.99 paperback, ISBN 978-0-4158-9647-4**

Gerardine Meaney over the last decade has worked on uncovering and challenging patriarchal discourses in Irish national identity and culture and, indeed, in Irish Studies. Her book *Gender, Ireland, and Cultural Change* is a theoretically-sophisticated collection of essays that explore changing constructions of Ireland, focusing on 'cultural processes and social movements that have impacted on the most intimate experiences and the most deeply held senses of identity' (xvii). The book's themes are developed through an analysis of canonical and lesser-known literature, as well as films, television dramas, and documentaries. Meaney uses Lacanian psychoanalysis, feminism and post-colonial theory as overlapping, though hardly frictionless, interpretative frameworks to examine how patriarchy and xenophobia helped to form, and remain embedded within, Ireland's post-colonial identity. She also draws attention to 'manifestations of the official gendering of Irish national identity and of resistance to those official identities' (xviii), and she is critical of how post-colonial studies has been applied to Ireland.

Meaney's work shows how the study of nationalism in Taiwan and in Taiwan Studies could benefit from the three strands of her approach. While there are some critiques of nationalism in Taiwan from a post-colonial perspective, psychoanalytic and feminist critiques of nationalism in Taiwan are largely undeveloped. One of the few studies analysing feeling is Horng-Luen Wang's essay '*Ressentiment* in Modern Communities: Some Preliminary Reflections on Taiwan's Experience' (2004), which draws on Nietzsche's term *ressentiment* to interpret in a general psychological way Taiwan's attitude towards China and international society.

One example of a post-colonial critique of Taiwan's nationalism is Mark Harrison's *Legitimacy, Meaning and Knowledge in the Making of Taiwanese Identity* (2006). Harrison's intervention in debates about national identity in Taiwan begin with a critique of the European liberal assumptions which have underpinned