

Intersecting Fame and America

An Introduction

Alessandro Clericuzio^[1] and Cinzia Schiavini^[2]

University of Perugia^[1]; University of Milan^[2]

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4351-8283>^[1]; n/a^[2]

Email: alessandro.clericuzio@unipg.it^[1]; cinzia.schiavini@unimi.it^[2]

The ever-evolving spectrum of critical approaches to the humanities has recently embraced celebrity studies, which proved significantly apt for the understanding of American culture. The specific American identity built on the importance of personally and nationally “standing out,” which can easily work as a synonym for being famous, has partly shaped conceptualizations of American exceptionalism. Rags to riches stories, rises to stardom, fandom cultures, as well as sports, literature, and entertainment iconizations, though they have no national monopoly, have been part of the development of the idea of Americanness long before social media would make these features available to everybody everywhere.

The fact that reality television and the Instagram contents machine in the 21st century have deeply metamorphosed the availability, production, and consumption of celebrity has very likely brought about the need to delve deeper into the workings of this phenomenon and envision its past and present clusters of meanings and conceptual intersections.

The foundation of the academic journal *Celebrity Studies* in 2010 has spurred its adoption in the field of anglophone cultural studies, not without perplexity on the part of traditional observers. Published by Taylor & Francis, it has now reached its sixteenth volume, amassing over fifty issues and hundreds of articles parsing the cultural weight of fame and stardom in contemporary and historical contexts. This interest in celebrity has unearthed and brought into focus a great number of publications as well as possible sites of analysis related to fame in American Culture, predating its establishment as an academic subject.

Among the early publications offering theoretical and critical approaches to celebrity studies are Gaylyn Studlar, *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (Columbia UP, 1996); Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (Pluto Press, 2000); Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (Routledge, 2001); Loren Glass, *Authors Inc.: Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States 1880–1980* (New York University Press, 2004). More recent research is provided by Karen Sternheimer, *Celebrity Culture and the American Dream:*

Stardom and Social Mobility (Routledge, 2014); Susan Douglas and Andrea McDonnell, *Celebrity: A History of Fame* (New York University Press, 2019); Sharon Marcus, *The Drama of Celebrity* (Princeton University Press, 2019); Bonnie Carr O'Neill, *Literary Celebrity and Public Life in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (University of Georgia Press, 2023); Stephanie Patrick, *Celebrity and New Media: Gatekeeping Success* (Routledge, 2024).

Due to what is known as a bandwagon effect, the amount of critical literature on celebrity is nowadays huge and has led the editors of this issue to pursue analytical work solely in the field of American studies, as pertains to *Iperstoria*. Starting with a Call for Contributions focused on the nexus of celebrity, luxury and partying (not strictly limited to fame alone), a collection of essays ranging from novels to TV series, from politics to photography, from literary to film celebs, from AIDS to Covid-19 has been assembled.

Chronologically speaking, the essay that reaches back the furthest is Alessandro Clericuzio's "Truman Capote's Mid-Century Subversive Celebrity," dealing as it does with the author's rise to fame in the years 1947 and 1948. By no means the first nor the last American writer to step into the spotlight, Capote's case is singular in that he was instantly and prematurely transformed into a celebrity before having published his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. The paper traces the canny mediatization young Capote managed to activate through the medium of photography to create, shape and promote his public persona.

What is most surprising about this path to fame is that, grounded as it was in a subversion of the heterosexual male gender codes, it took place at a time when homophobia, in the United States, was at its highest level, between the notorious Oscar Wilde trials of 1895 and the Stonewall Riots of 1969. While other writers exploring the theme of same-sex love in the 1940s and 1950s were either forgotten or strongly hindered in their professional image, Capote seems to have devised the perfect mixture of transgression and allusiveness to garner visibility, praise and long-lasting iconic status.

The atmosphere of late 1960s Hollywood provides the background for Joan Didion's novel *Play It As It Lays*, mapped by Adélaïde Malval in her essay "Celebrity and Disconnection in Joan Didion's Hollywood Writings." Didion's writings allow for a pivotal feature of celebrity to be exposed, that of the alienation, splitting and disconnection of identity that fame, in the form of re-presentation, inevitably entails. The doubling – and sometimes tripling – of the individual dimension that stardom imposes on the artist involved in the celebrity machine is most evident in the character of Maria, the fictional actress around whom the plot of Didion's novel revolves. Madness, violence, death and, even more disquieting, personal obliteration are some of the effects that Hollywood's 'dream dump' has scripted for its denizens, whether they are attempting to gain the status of celebrities or are established members in the legendary hall of fame.

Hollywood, homophobia and fame reappear in Anna Ferrari's "The Hollywood Triangle: AIDS, Media, and Celebrity Culture," bitterly linked to one another by the threat of contagion. This paper traces the reasons and the effects of a specific nexus involving three Hollywood stars and their relation to the AIDS epidemic. Rock Hudson, Elizabeth Taylor and Ronald Reagan, in their respective roles as the first star victim of AIDS, the most visible star activist, and the first American president migrating from the big screen to politics, have been involved in the mainstream narrative of the epidemic. Their fame operated in rather different directions at the time of the AIDS crisis.

Hudson was the epitome of the all-American straight man, father, husband or lover, so much so that his 1950s films with Doris Day have been termed an initiation to heterosexuality for audiences worldwide. When his status as an AIDS victim exposed his homosexuality, the popular perception of the epidemic changed forever, and not for the best, with fear of contagion increasing alongside accusations of betrayal. In the meanwhile, gay icon Elizabeth Taylor used her stardom to sensitize the public to fundraising and to dismantle the equation of AIDS and homosexuality. President Reagan, on the other hand, after silencing the emergency was forced to publicly acknowledge the danger of the virus in spite of his political tendency not to discuss either the epidemic or matters of sexuality. Ferrari's essay delves into these issues by focusing on the dynamics that caused the intersection of taboos and anxieties in the media representation and popular culture perception of AIDS.

An analogous intersection of luxury, parties and celebrity involving marginality and social anxieties is explored in Giuseppe Polise's essay leading us into the world of 1980s ballrooms as portrayed in the television series *Pose* (2018-2021). Ballroom culture, Latinx and African American flamboyance, as well as the queer celebration of art, artifice and transgression met in these sanctuaries of anti-hegemonic opulence. The people that gravitated towards such gatherings were mainly members of marginalized communities, who explored their non-normative self through practices of creative self-fashioning resonating with and at the same time defying the success- and stardom-obsessed world that lay 'outside.'

The music world, its industry, and celebrity culture are investigated by Cinzia Schiavini in "Celebrity, Punk, Time, Nostalgia, and the Unpredictable Trajectories of Fame in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*." By studying Jennifer Egan's 2011 novel, Schiavini parses the depiction of a number of issues related to American celebrity, such as the craving for eternal youth, beauty and bodily perfection, cultural consumption, the power of fame to confer immortality, and the search for possible alternative authenticity in the mediascapes of the third millennium. The experimental structure of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* merges literature and music, thus becoming a specimen of intermediality where both culture and counterculture show their dependence on the construction and dissemination of celebrity.

Michele Russo's contribution titled "The Return to the American Golden Age" offers, as the subtitle reads, linguistic insights into Donald Trump's 2024 presidential campaign. By thoroughly investigating the language typifying no less than sixty-one speeches delivered by the candidate, Russo suggests that the political and linguistic rationale behind Trump's victory shows the power of a political celebrity in influencing the choices of voters with overt policies of exclusion. As often happens in most fields where the lure of stardom applies, the status of icon that Trump has embodied in his last campaign has given identity to fragmented sectors of American society, even though this was done – linguistically and practically – at the expense of harmless groups such as immigrants and transgender people, not to mention Trump's political opponents.

The six essays constituting the special section of this issue of *Iperstoria* prove interconnected through several clusters of motifs. The fear of contagion runs through the 1980s in Ferrari's and Polise's pieces and the 2020s in Russo's, with entertainment and politics celebrities having to deal with AIDS and Covid-19. Malval hints at criminals turned into stars in the case of Bonnie and Clyde or Charles Manson, thus providing an avenue tracing the dark side of American celebrity and of the American public's obsession with crime, as would be evident in Truman Capote's second huge surge in popularity with the publication of his novel *In Cold Blood* (1965).

Balls and parties are among the most visible expressions of the freedom celebrity allows the members of its restricted circle. They sustain the utopian impulse in *Pose* and form the background for Maria's Hollywood life in Didion's novel, as well as for Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. In the latter, especially, La Doll's party of the century works as the fictional counterpart of Truman Capote's 1966 black and white ball held at the Plaza Hotel in New York, duly considered the real party of the century. Finally, Hollywood as a dream machine – or a dream dump, depending on which perspective one embraces – is the wall-to-wall primary source of celebrities and celebrity culture permeating Western culture/imagination since its birth at the end of the 19th century. As such, it is the epitome of the production, dissemination, and consumption of that specific blend of fame that has marked American society.