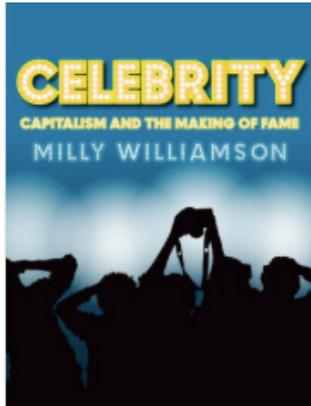


Book Review

Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame, by Milly Williamson

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Williamson, Milly (2016) *Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame*. London: Polity. 216 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-4105-8.

In this fascinating book, Milly Williamson argues for a reconsideration of film stardom and celebrity culture in light of the economic history that underpins the sphere of cultural production. *Celebrity: Capitalism and the Making of Fame* informs the reader that any investigations into the emergence of the star system, audience curiosity about performers' private lives, and even the role of the public in reality programming, must also consider the economics that form the cult of celebrity.

At a time when celebrity studies continues to offer critical insight into specific performers, from arenas as diverse as star politics to micro-celebrity, it is both refreshing and enlightening to find a book that takes a different scholarly tangent. Williamson questions the democratisation of fame in an expanding public sphere; but rather than work with a textual consideration or a discursive interrogation, she opens up a new debate concerning the political economy of celebrity culture.

Williamson makes the point that the contemporary culture of celebrity 'was not an inevitable product of our social and economic system' (2016:

155). Indeed, she is very clear in telling readers that 'in the early forms of capitalist media and entertainment, celebrity and stardom were not immediately or necessarily apparent' (2016: 155). Instead, we are convincingly told that public interest in famous faces were strongly encouraged for audience share, and thus, for profit margins.

Her first question asks us to think about the circumstances that have existed in order to enable the emergence of celebrity. This is followed up by an exploration of the role of celebrity in the popular media industries, with reference to specific historical periods ranging from Georgian theatre to the introduction of satellite television. The point of these interweaving threads is that the development and continued growth of celebrity within and beyond the Hollywood A-list is based on the role of these popular individuals to economic markets. This is not to suggest that the Hollywood performer works in the same way as the reality star or micro-celebrity. Rather, Williamson makes the point that celebrity has become 'a key selling mechanism' in a variety of media forms and markets, in 'distinct, but connected

ways' (2016: 22).

With this in mind, I would suggest that Williamson's work is to Chris Rojek's *Celebrity* (2001) what Paul McDonald's *Hollywood Stardom* (2013) was to Richard Dyer's seminal *Stars* (1979). Just as McDonald looked beyond film stars as a site of consumption to examine the bonds that exist between culture and commerce, Williamson extends Rojek's work on celebrity to look at the relationship between culture and commerce both within and beyond contemporary film stardom.

In the opening chapter of the book, Williamson unpacks the changing character of fame, both economically and culturally, in relation to capitalist society. Subsequent chapters examine celebrity and the theatre, the industrialisation of cultural production, the relationship between celebrity and the news media, notions of 'ordinary' celebrity, and what Williamson terms the 'internet of the self' (2016: 130). Each chapter is exhaustively researched, eloquently written, persuasively argued and original in its contribution. In short, it is a new volume in the field that will soon find its place as a key text, and a set reading on undergraduate courses on film stardom and celebrity culture.

Williamson clearly understands the questions that students are interested in when they embark on research on film stardom and celebrity culture, and she does a very good job of steering them away from the obvious and oft spoken 'common sense' answers to questions concerning the emergence of the star system. Rather, she takes the time to clearly and coherently lay out what at first glance might appear to be unexpected answers to questions posed, based on the emergence and development of a diverse array of media industries, and the economic role and responsibility of celebrity culture in the press and news media, the cinema, the television industry and the internet.

Williamson draws attention to key debates from the field in question, takes the time to introduce seminal theories and theorists, whilst also looking to contemporary themes, debates and practices, which is particularly useful for students who are approaching this topic for the first time. That said, the volume still manages to offer a robust and rigorous take on

the subject for theorists who are researching in the field in question.

References

- Dyer, R. (1998) *Stars*. London: BFI Publishing.
McDonald, P. (2013) *Hollywood Stardom*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Rojek, C. (2001) *Celebrity*. London: Reaktion Books.