

Merck, Mandy. 2020. *Cinema's Melodramatic Celebrity: Film, Fame and Personal Worth*. London: Bloomsbury. 268pp.

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fangqi0527@gmail.com

orcid.org/0000-0003-4150-3408

It hardly seems surprising that celebrities across the world did not keep away from probably the greatest globally-concerned incident of 2020—COVID-19. Not only did we see how actions of artistic, political and sporting celebrities made the headlines of global news, but we also witnessed those who appeared on the frontlines of the battle against the coronavirus pandemic—medical experts, government spokesmen, including common people who made their part—obtaining fame and public attention just as celebrities do. During October 2020, several Chinese local TV channels broadcast simultaneously the television series *With You* (*Zai Yi Qi*) based on the real-life stories of people who acquired nationwide acknowledgement for their contribution in the anti-coronavirus fight in Wuhan. Reuniting a great number of Chinese film and TV stars to play the roles of the heroes against the epidemic, *With You* summoned well-known celebrities to “reproduce” popular idols who made their names during the crisis.

Living in contemporary societies where the Internet, social media, and a great variety of TV shows substantially facilitate information circulation and enable “ordinary” individuals to achieve wider recognition, grassroots celebrities have become commonplace and we are witnessing an ever-heightened “celebrity culture.” Fame, charisma and glamour are emerging from a profusion of channels and irrupting on the epidermis of contemporary societies. A study of celebrity and personal worth seems more relevant than ever.

Being one of the major factories that have long been involved in the manufacture of celebrities, the film industry continues to launch

popular idols that mirror the dominant value systems and cultural trends of their times. As an instrument of audience attraction, film stars enjoy such an elevated and sublime reputation as extraordinary heroes do that a “religion” of admiration and cult is forged around them. Mandy Merck’s *Cinema’s Melodramatic Celebrity: Film, Fame and Personal Worth* is a timely and acute attempt to address the celebrity culture that has been shaped in the film industry and which has accompanied a century of cinema’s history.

Defending film celebrities as objects of interest for societies and magnifying glasses to look through culture histories, gender politics, media and entertaining industries, popular and mass culture in contemporary societies, Merck explores the symbolic, social and commercial values of fame and notoriety in her book. In doing so, the book embroiders a series of indispensable and adored film stars such as Charlie Chaplin, Lana Turner, Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier, Judy Garland, Bradley Cooper; celebrities from other fields like visual arts, politics, intelligence and the music industry who set foot in audiovisual endeavours such as Tracey Emin, Anthony Weiner, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden, Barbra Streisand and Lady Gaga; as well as royal celebrities reworked into melodramatic narratives such as Princess Diana and the Queen Elizabeth II.

In a thorough examination of the films with fame as their central concern in which the earlier mentioned names embody their very own public recognition, the author assists her analyses by a fruitful investigation into the archives of media critiques and publications that have contributed to the stars’ transcendence. In nine chapters, the book compiles plentiful recounts, biographies and testimonies of celebrities’ life episodes and trajectories, intending to look at how these stars’ intimate vicissitudes are hinted at in their cinematic works and in some cases condition the readings of their films. Incorporating in her film analyses exhaustively investigated celebrity background information, the author manages to provide contextualized interpretations of the films’ details that may otherwise pass unnoticed.

Nonetheless, the lack of a coherent discourse that could string together the historical facts largely weakens the book’s argumentative power. Rather than serving as examples to defend a well-organized thesis, the anecdotes perhaps take too much prominence on some occasions, rendering the book overly descriptive and encyclopaedic at times.

Regardless of this deficiency, in its discussions connecting diegetic and extradiegetic universes, the book deepens our understandings of the tight and complex relationship between the star system and popular imaginary. In the selected case studies of melodramatic

films, public recognition of the celebrities' images is often considered as parallel and identical to stars' onscreen images, which helps to facilitate film stars' identification with their roles and to reduce the distance between the stars and the spectators, thus contributing to the former's popularity and appeal. In this way, the intermingling of celebrities' private lives and their onscreen characters transcends the diegetic fiction and extends to the realm of the meta-textually constructed star reality. The reciprocal influence between the stars and their characters reflects the "personality dialectic" pointed out by Edgar Morin ([1956] 1972), who argues that the stars impose their personalities on their roles while likewise the roles impose their personalities on the star personas.

Over its pages, the book provides us with a multidisciplinary insight by incorporating philosophical, sociological and historiographical approaches that serve as theoretical bases and methodologies of its meticulous film studies. Mandy Merck demonstrates her extensive knowledge in philosophical enquiries and debates over the notion of fame and personal worth. Citing Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Adam Smith, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others, the author synthesizes the questions most closely-related to celebrities that have been discussed in artistic traditions prior to cinema such as literature and theatre, and in this way contextualizes the relatively more recent cinema stardom. Her endeavour to approach celebrity studies from diverse academic backgrounds constitutes one major contribution of this book.

The book makes a worthwhile study for a diverse range of readers—it is indicated not only for an academic audience, but also for cinephiles who would enjoy a pleasant read recalling the moments of every film and its celebrity's anecdotes addressed in the book. Through her knowledgeable accounts and interdisciplinary discussions, Merck inspires us to interpret these films, their characters and stars, as well as their production processes from a brand-new horizon, revealing us a multitude of secrets that the film screen beholds and helping us to discover the keys to approach the singularities of a series of great personalities that cinema has bestowed us.

References

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