

Desecrating Celebrity. Italian Cases in Cinema, TV Series, Music and Social Media

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The theme of “celebrity”, its cultural origins, its social meaning and media propagation, and its effects on the audience, has interested scholars of various disciplines for a long time. Just recently, however, an academic research area called “Celebrity Studies” has been established, with a consolidated tradition mostly in the Anglo-Saxon countries.

Early theorists of celebrity, especially in the United States, focused their sociological analysis on what they recognized as a shift in the system of reputation (Klapp 1949, Mills 1956, Boorstin 1961), from one rooted in honor and merit, to one in which media exposure becomes the primary source of visibility and fame. However, not all the founding texts of the field share the suspicious and somewhat moralistic attitude towards the celebrity of this strand of studies.

Two key books from Europe - Edgar Morin’s *Les Stars* (1957) and Richard Dyer’s *Stars* (1979) - laid the foundations of star studies as a legitimate branch of film scholarship and opened up the question of the meaning that celebrities have for their fans and for the cultural systems in which they are embedded. Morin’s pioneering work was especially interested in the particular place between the sacred and the profane that stars occupied, and in their role of “modern myths” of the cultural industry. Dyer’s book explored stars as social signs able to incorporate and disseminate specific values, views, and beliefs, underlining the polysemy and the multiplicity of meanings that they can embody.

In more recent audiences and media studies, the interest in celebrity culture has been further developed. According to Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2010), the topic is already present in the 1980s in classic studies addressing the role played by TV and media consumption in people's everyday life. However, it is in the 1990s and 2000s that celebrity culture gradually has acquired increasing importance in audience studies, booming with fandom studies (cf. among other Hills, 2002) and with the diffusion of reality shows and factual TV shows (Hill, 2005). Among others, three areas of study have emerged in the 1990s and 2000s: 1) "performing audiences" (Abercrombie, Longhurst, 1998) and fan production (Jenkins, 1992) in their relationship with the objects (including celebrities) they "adore" (Lewis, 1992); 2) the relationship between media and material consumption practices of the audience and the (self-) commodification of celebrities (Cashmore, 2006; Rojek, 2012); 3) the relationship between ordinary people and celebrity culture. From a double standpoint, that is, understanding how and why ordinary people have gained such a prominent position in contemporary media and how this has reshaped celebrity culture towards a "trivialization" of celebrities, pushing them to represent themselves in ordinary settings and to participate in what Turner (2010) has called the "demotic turn" in media and popular culture.

These different research strands have large overlaps as it became evident with social media where online celebrities and "micro-celebrities" (Marwick, 2014) call our attention on the very same topics establishing a research agenda focused on: 1) the relationship between daily life/self-presentation/content curation; 2) self-commodification and self-branding; 3) the relationship of online celebrities with followers and their "participatory" practices.

The Italian contribution to this extensive area of investigation started to appear in the second half of the last century. From *L'élite senza potere* by Francesco Alberoni (1963) to some essays by Umberto Eco, like *Fenomenologia di Mike Bongiorno* (1961) or *Il mito di Superman* (1964), the themes of stardom and celebrity have been at the core of many of the reflections on media productions, focusing primarily on cinematic phenomena (we may remember Guido Aristarco (ed.) *Il mito dell'attore. Come l'industria della star produce il sex symbol*, 1983). In recent years, however, a group of scholars from various Italian Universities has started to conceive an Italian research field capable of defining or re-defining Celebrity and mapping the thematic differences that this topic calls into question in the new millennium.

An assessment of the developing arena of celebrity studies in Italy, a reflection on the hermeneutic tools and procedures that characterize this field and on the possibility of activating a dialogue with international scholars started in November 2015 with a conference entitled *Celebrities. Fashion, Branding, Performance in the era of Social Media*, organized at University of Bologna, Department of the Arts. The conference gathered scholars of cinema and popular culture, scholars of acting and performance, like those from the CRAD - the research center on acting and stardom based in the University of Turin -, and observers of most recent phenomena that bind celebrities and fashion. From that moment on, this group of scholars has expanded, including a variety of different

disciplines: cinema and television studies, media studies, pop culture, audience studies and fashion studies, music and performance studies, communication, sociology. The group's agenda is therefore to further develop the interdisciplinary approach that is essential to operate in the field of Celebrity Culture.

In 2016 a full-fledged research group took shape, under the name of INC (Italian Research Network in Celebrity Culture), bringing together scholars from the Universities of Bologna, Turin, Florence, Rome-La Sapienza, Bergamo, Urbino, Milan (IULM) creating partnerships with research centres such as CRAD, and CFC. INC's fundamental purpose is that of promulgating the study in the culture of celebrity in Italy and circulating the existing research products related to the topic, while maintaining a strong focus on analytical methodologies.

Currently, the group operates along two different lines: planning conferences or round tables and publishing new editorial products of Celebrity Studies that create a dialogue between Italian and international scholars. The need to find an Italian network derives from the acknowledgement that academic research on celebrity occupies a marginal territory in our country and is instead frequently incorporated into other thematic or disciplinary frameworks that tend to re-semanticize it. Little attention is attributed to Celebrity Culture as a specific and independent approach. Consistently with the INC's agenda, a series of occasions of exchange and study followed the 2015 conference. In Rimini, a few events were organized at the Department of Life Quality Sciences (University of Bologna), investigating the relationship between celebrity culture and fashion:

- a Special Lecture with Pamela Church-Gibson entitled *Celebrities, Fashion Studies, Media* (November 2015);
- a day conference linked to the Media Mutation Convention, which deals with the themes of the *Media Mutations Serial fashion. Celebrity*, (2016);
- the *Celebrity* section of "ZoneModa Conference – Sizing" (2017).

Another day was organized at the Department of Arts of the University of Bologna:

- *Celebrities and Cultural Industries. Film, Fashion, Music, Advertising* (2016).

At the University of Bergamo, a two-day international symposium was dedicated to David Bowie, unquestionable global celebrity:

- *Iconic 01. Bowie. Still / Life / Image* (2017).

Finally, in 2018, the "4th Celebrity Studies Journal Conference", entitled *Desecrating Celebrity*, was organized at the La Sapienza University of Rome, underlining the interest of the international academic community towards Italian studies.

The most recent outcome of this study of celebrity-culture in the realm of audio-visual production and consumption can be found in various publications by the members of the group, especially on journals like *Comunicazioni sociali*, *Bianco e Nero*, *La valle dell'Eden*, *Zone Moda Journal*, *Film Fashion and Consumption*. Below here are listed only the volumes entirely dedicated to the topic:

- Volume 5, Number 1 of the *Film, Fashion and Consumption Journal*, (August 2016), edited by Marta Martina, Antonella Mascio, Sara Pesce. The Volume is dedicated to the relationship between Fashion Studies and Celebrity Cultures in Italy;

- A “Celebrity Culture and Media Mutation” section of the collective volume *Fashion, Culture and Society. Notebooks 2016*, Bruno Mondadori / Pearson, Milan, 2016, (edited by Roy Menarini);
- Volume 7 of the magazine *ZoneModa Journal*, entitled "Fashion and Celebrity Culture" (edited by Sara Pesce and Pamela Church-Gibson, 2007).

As we stated before, in Italy scholars in media and audience studies – as we definitely are – have traditionally addressed these issues while not publicly defining their research and debate as celebrity studies, also for this field is still observed with both curiosity and snobbery, watched from afar, dismissed or not completely understood and appropriated. In this way, the aim of our network is to distress the academy, provoking an original debate on celebrity culture in Italy, and at the same time to make closer and more effective our common interest in these issues. The opportunity came when some of us participated in the Celebrity Studies Journal Conference in Amsterdam in 2016 and accepted the challenge to host the 2018 edition¹. For our network this was an effective starting-point for an open examination of what celebrity studies is doing now from an international perspective and to construct an agenda for substantive change in the academy awareness, in Italy and abroad.

Within the contemporary scenario, the pace of production of famous people within the contemporary mediascape seems to have accelerated in recent years: the connective media are progressively involving in both the celebrification (Gamson 1994; Turner 2006) and celebritisation (Driessen 2013) process a larger and more diverse group of people compared to the past. In particular, as we know, ordinary people who gain visibility and fame are legitimated as celebrity in the mediatized performative society. This process can be seen as an economically-driven artifice facilitated by media institutions that produce and promote celebrities and put them into a position of very public intimacy by covering their private lives or turning their private lives into stories and commodities to consume. As a matter of fact, in contemporary society, widespread digital circulation of content on media and social media enlarges the audience and increases people’s engagement towards celebrities: the media provide the audience with a complex and intensified representation, where the person’s status dynamics are constantly negotiated and evaluated by the people and the audience, who definitely are witnesses of such processes, through their participation and everyday interactions.

What is new in the contemporary media system is that this intense acceleration of recruitment and “celebrification” can rapidly turn into rituals of degradation, marking significant movements in a person's social position. In contemporary society, this kind of ritual is generally managed through media representations, which are progressively changing and expanding in the new media ecosystem. As a matter of fact, the widespread digital circulation of content on social media and the consequent increasing visibility of celebrity enhances people’s engagement in ways that can result in a necessary amplified “desecrating effect” compared to the past.

For this reason, in order to define the main theme of the 2018 conference, Sapienza’s scholars, as members of the Scientific Committee, started to address the idea of ‘celebrity

desecration’ as a complementary perspective to the ‘celebrity authentication’ theme, verified in 2016 in Amsterdam. As we perfectly know, traditionally, across cultures, degradation is the opposite and – in a certain way - the complement to accreditation ceremonies, which are two social practices that involve a community’s shared values and specific social roles (Garfinkel, 1956). However, what is the meaning (and the social values) of desecration in the contemporary accelerated mediascape? Do media need degradation rituals more than in the past to create a celebrity? Could we consider the desecrating process as a new way (even strategy) to reach endorsement and authentication? What is the cost of success if this opportunity comes at the price of being publicly humiliated – or seen as *losers* – by the audiences? In other words, can celebrification be a form of abjection, and vice versa?

The aim of the conference was to investigate both how celebrities manage their status in the contemporary fluid mediascape, what set of communicative practices are involved in both celebrification and desecration processes and what happens when celebrities lose their own status. Far from being linear, this relationship between desecration and celebrification in the new media ecosystem does require a deep analysis.

This special issue of Mediascapes Journal reflects on the conference theme focusing on Italian celebrities as they were addressed during the parallel sessions. Then, we invited scholars who presented insightful perspectives on very controversial and well-known Italian case studies, to carry on the discussion. The result is a composed and rich scenario, that deals with the issue from multiple perspectives, underlining how the degradation and desecration processes represent today, as indeed in the past, the counterpart of the celebrification within the contemporary mediascape.

In the article entitled *1992/1993. A story of political celebrity degradation through a fiction framework*, Antonella Mascio analyses the Italian TV series dedicated to the political Italian scandal called Tangentopoli and explores the way in which degradation and delegitimization processes are told in the series. More specifically the article focuses on the different narrative strategies that allow to observe, on the one hand, the political celebrity degradation both for the individuals and for the social system and, on the other hand, the symbolical processes of degradation seen as “ceremonies of degradation”.

Another controversial Italian case of degradation of the celebrity is the central issue of the Silvia Vacirca’s *Il caso Tortora”: assuming the celebrity’s guilt*. The article analyses this impressive example of spectacular justice – concerning the famous anchorman Enzo Tortora arrested for mafia crimes in 1983 – by underlying the role played by media in the construction of a “guilty narrative” and the possible presence of pre-conditions that could have favoured the destruction of Tortora’s public persona.

Starting from an opposite case to the previous one, the article *Scandal as Medium of the Celebritization Process: Exploring the ‘Mina as Mother’ Image in the Context of Post-War Italian Culture* by Rachel Haworth takes Mina’s celebrity as a case study to examine the legacies of scandal within the celebritization process. After presenting an overview of the nature and significance of Mina’s celebrity – since Mina was

and is one of Italy's most popular and best-loved pop singers – the article examines the press coverage of the 1963 scandal, as a way of determining how Mina's motherhood was constructed and perceived as scandalous by 1960s Italian society and then observes how this scandal shaped and continues to inform the meanings of Mina as celebrity and star. The article thus tracks the impact of scandal on the creation, circulation, and significance of celebrity in contemporary society.

The Isabella Pezzini and Bianca Terracciano's article *The Pope-celebrity and the role of cinema* focuses on the analysis of some movies and/or sequences of films considered effective examples of the celebrification of certain religious figures. From movies like *Roma* and *La dolce vita* by Federico Fellini, to *Habemus Papam* by Nanni Moretti and the series *The Young Pope* by Paolo Sorrentino, the article sheds an interesting light on the processes of sacralization and desacralization of the religious figure, namely the Pope, and the role played by the fictional imaginary.

From a different perspective, but from a similar interest for the celebrification of the religious figures, the article by Anna Maria Lorusso is dedicated to *The Strange Case of Pope Francis: Between Populism, Celebrity and Divinity*. In order to understand in which way Pope Francis may be considered a celebrity, the article analyses some features of Pope Francis' discourses and practices to observe the strange mix between divine sacredness and earthly humanity.

A further look on the relationship between sacred celebrity and degradation can be found in the paper *Where is the sacred in online celebrity? Praise, loath and physical interaction with Italian webstars* by Stefano Brilli. The article analyses the transformations of the fan-celebrity interaction by examining how the online proximity between young internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical settings. Through a multi-sited ethnographic observation in pre-staged encounters, such as meet-and-greets, book signing events and club parties, the research examines what kind of social distance is ritually enacted in such occasions and how the typical profane/sacred code of media rituals is redefined in the "desecrated" environment of online celebrity.

Finally, the Romana Andò's article *The revenge of Asia: Desecrating celebrity as a means of celebrity culture* presents the very controversial Asia Argento's case. Starting from the facts related to her involvement in two sex scandals (the first with the producer Harvey Weinstein and the second with the young actor Jimmy Bennet) the case is seen as an intriguing example of both the extraordinary growth of contemporary celebrity culture and the exceptional acceleration of both accreditation and desecration processes, resulting in a blended, confused, often conflicted representation of celebrity.

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Notes

¹ This conference is part of a long-term project, managed by *Celebrity Studies Journal published by Routledge* and a Scientific Committee (Susan Holmes, University of West Anglia; Neil Ewan, University of Winchester, Hannah Hamad, University of East Anglia, Sean Redmond, Deakin University). The first conference 'Celebrity Studies now', took place in 2012 (December 12-14th) at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. The second edition 'Approaching celebrity', took place in 2014 (19-21 June), at Royal Holloway University of London. The third edition 'Authenticating Celebrity', was held in 2016 (June 28th-30th), at University of Amsterdam. The fourth edition 'Desecrating Celebrity' was host by Sapienza University of Rome in 2018 (June 26-28).The scientific committee members were: Romana Andò (Chair), James Bennett, Hannah Hamad, Neil Ewan, Gaston Franssen, Andrea Minuz, Sean Redmond, Alessandro Saggiaro. <https://celebritystudiesconference.com/cfp-2/>