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Swivelling the spotlight: stardom, celebrity and ‘me’

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Celebrity studies critiques the ways in which celebrity culture constructs discourses of authenticity and disclosure, offering the cultural and economic circulation of the ‘private’ self. Rarely, however, do we turn the spotlight on *ourselves* as not only scholars of stardom and celebrity, but also part of the *audience*. Autoethnography has become increasingly important across different disciplines, although its status within media and cultural studies is less visible and secure, not least because the emphasis on personal attachments to media forms may threaten the discipline’s still contested claim to cultural legitimacy. The study of stars and celebrities has often found itself at the ‘lower’ end of this already debased continuum, perhaps making such tensions particularly acute. Based on three personal narratives of engagements with stars and celebrities, this co-authored article explores the potential relationships between autoethnography and celebrity studies, and considers the personal, intellectual, and political implications of bringing the scholar *into* the celebrity frame.

Keywords: autoethnography; emotion; personal; subjectivity

Introduction

The economy of celebrity coverage trades on the concept of the personal, and, despite considerable cultural and technological changes in the contemporary media landscape, the suggestion that this pivots on the rhetoric of ‘really’ (‘what is this person *really* like?’) (Dyer 1986, p. 2) still remains entirely apposite. While interrogating and critiquing the ways in which celebrity culture constructs discourses of authenticity and disclosure, a great deal of academic writing in the field pivots on the analysis of this process – the commodification of disclosure, and the cultural circulation of the ‘private’ self. Rarely, however, do we turn the spotlight on *ourselves* as not only scholars of stardom and celebrity, but also part of the *audience*. This co-authored piece begins to pose questions about why, and it considers the personal, intellectual, and political implications of bringing the scholar into the celebrity frame.

As Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson explains, ‘autoethnography seeks to explicitly “write in” the researcher as a key player – often *the* key player – within a research project or account ...’ (2013, p. 281; original emphasis). Approaches to autoethnography are relatively diverse (see Holman Jones *et al.* 2013), but it is often suggested that, in differing from autobiography, one of the key features of autoethnography is the use of personal experience to explore the relationship between the personal and the social, or the micro and the macro (Holman Jones *et al.* 2013). Autoethnography emerged in a context in which a range of theoretical and disciplinary voices – from postmodernism, to poststructuralism to feminism – were contesting issues of truth, voice, ‘objectivity’ and representation (Holman Jones *et al.* 2013,

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p. 18), and the last 15 years has seen its growth in many disciplines on a global scale. Yet this growth has also been met with contention and critique. Autoethnography has been criticised or rejected as simply ‘navel-gazing’, a form of ‘indulgent autobiography’, or even part of our cultural compulsion to peep in on ‘damaged selves’ (Wall 2008, p. 50), and a number of publishers, journals and reviewers still harbour a ‘deep suspicion and fear of “personal accounts”’ (Sparkes 2000 cited Wall 2008, p. 47). These anxieties do not simply foreground autoethnography’s perceived challenge to more orthodox and traditional approaches to qualitative research. They are also clearly gendered; in so far as subjectivity, emotion and uncertainty have historically been gendered female, whereas objectivity, rationality and authority have been gendered male (Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, p. 29). It is thus unsurprising that autoethnography has become particularly important in feminist research (see Holman Jones *et al.* 2013).

Nevertheless, the disciplinary expansion of autoethnography has been uneven. Tillman (2009) observed how (while flourishing in disciplines such as sociology), it was still rare to find ethnographic accounts in communication and media studies, a situation that remains largely unchanged. This points to the fact that the study of media and popular culture, which has had to struggle for cultural legitimacy, may have seen itself as having a particularly uneasy relationship with autoethnography. In thinking through the intellectual and political factors that have encouraged academics ‘to bury the traces of their personal and cultural histories by employing more “objective” theoretical and rhetorical approaches’ (Doty 2000, p. 11), Alexander Doty observes how this ‘suppression’ may have been seen as ‘especially urgent’ by those working on popular culture. Doty continues by suggesting that ‘It’s as if showing too much interest in what we are writing about somehow undermines our credibility as intellectuals’ (2000, p. 11) – a judgement that would be unlikely to be levelled at academics working in many other disciplines (from science to literature). The study of stars and celebrities has arguably often found itself at the ‘lower’ end of this already debased continuum (the very existence of this journal is still met with incredulity by many journalists), perhaps making such tensions particularly acute. In this regard, and especially at the start, it was important to distinguish the ‘new’ academic discourse on stars from more popular modes of engagement, such as fandom. In his canonical *Stars*, first published in 1979, Richard Dyer explained how:

[F]inally, I feel I should mention beauty, pleasure and delight ... The emphasis in this book has been on analysis and demystification ... However, we should not forget that what we are analysing gains its force and intensity from the way in which it is experienced... When I see Marilyn Monroe I catch my breath; when I see Montgomery Clift I sigh over how beautiful he is; when I see Barbara Stanwyck, I know that women are strong. I don’t want to privilege these responses over analysis, but equally I don’t want, in the rush to analysis, to forget what it is that I am analysing ... [W]hile I accept utterly that beauty and pleasure are culturally and historically specific, and in no way escape ideology, none the less they are beauty and pleasure and I want to hang on to them in some form or another. (1998, p. 162)

What is essentially a critical and methodological reflection on his personal investment in stars represents the final words of Dyer’s book. In this regard, Dyer very much positions this personal disclosure as an almost separate voice – after the proper business of academic analysis is complete. Indeed, this personal disclosure is imagined as the very opposite of intellectual ‘demystification’, presumably because it pivots on subjectivity, attachment and familiarity rather than on critical distance and ‘objectivity’. Furthermore, relations with stars and celebrities were theorised for some time as ‘para-social’ (Horton

and Wohl 1956), so to talk about them as ‘real’ – with particular affective and personal implications – was perhaps to position oneself as part of the ‘system’ that was being interrogated. This is far from a critique of Dyer *per se* (and his beautifully written paragraph still comes across as deeply powerful, honest and bold), but it does indicate, from a historical point of view, the ways in which personal disclosure has occupied a difficult role in star and celebrity studies, both in terms of the intellectual approaches that have attended its development and the particular challenges it has faced in staking a claim to academic legitimacy.

In foregrounding Dyer’s perspective above, we are not suggesting that academics all secretly harbour (or otherwise) star or celebrity fandoms that should be made explicit as part of the writing process (although if they do want to, that is fine). What draws us to writing about a particular person may well be anything from admiration, fandom, ambivalence, irritation, anger or political persuasion to shared personal experience. Rather, it is to highlight the extent to which why we write about who we do, and our cultural, affective or ideological relations with stars and celebrities, is rarely part of our academic discourse.

As the above quotes from Doty indicate, fan studies has done important work in opening up these debates about the necessarily blurred identities of the ‘personal’/academic self in the concept of the ‘Aca’ or scholar-fan (Doty 2000, Hills 2002). Although the complex position and status of the ‘Aca’ or ‘Scholar-fan’ in relation to the ‘ordinary’ fan has been explored and contested, what is significant here is that such debates did not move to prominence in star and celebrity studies. Furthermore, one of the critiques levelled at the concept of the scholar-fan has been that it has often functioned to legitimate pleasures and fandoms that are largely defined as male (Busse 2013). The apparently greater difficulty for women in speaking authoritatively and knowledgeably about their popular cultural preferences (which are indeed more likely to be positioned as ‘popular’ rather than ‘cult’) speaks to a long history of discourse in which mass culture and the ‘masses’ are positioned as feminine (Taylor 1989). Indeed, to return to the province of star and celebrity studies, it is women who have historically been constructed – and often dismissed – as the key audience for celebrity culture, responsible for its ‘regrettable’ perpetuation and pervasive (‘trivial’) cultural role. In this regard, if it is perceived to be intellectually or politically difficult to reflect on one’s own relationship with star or celebrity culture in an academic context, such risks may also be deeply gendered (while they also necessarily intersect with other factors such as class, ethnicity, age and sexuality).

In what follows, we each seek to reflect on stardom and celebrity from an autoethnographic point of view, exploring the ways in which our own personal biographies have made stars and celebrities meaningful (to us). We are not seeking to offer a definitive statement on the potential significance of autoethnographic work on the famous, and of course the very nature of auto (self) is specific, contingent and individualised, even while the ‘ethno’ part of the term necessarily also foregrounds the social. Rather, we hope that our different narratives here can function to stimulate debate for further research.

Lena Zavaroni and an anorexic connection

Su Holmes

Karen Carpenter and Lena Zavaroni represented the two visible media images of anorexia during my experience of growing up with an eating disorder in Britain in the early 1990s.

Born in 1976, I was too young to be an audience for The Carpenters when they were at the height of their success, and when the American soft rock singer Karen Carpenter, who died in 1983, was alive. My first encounter with The Carpenters' music was via the cassette player in our family car when I was around 10 or 11. Some three years later, my experience of her voice connected with some knowledge of the woman who sung it – a woman who had died from what I now had: something labelled as 'anorexia nervosa'. In the early 1990s, when medical and popular understandings of the illness remained limited, and media representations of it were less apparent than they are today, such a human reference point felt significant. Carpenter stood as both a sombre warning (foregrounded to me by adults as evidence of the mortal dangers of starvation), as well as the ultimate anorexic who had demonstrated the utmost commitment to the starvation 'cause'.

The Scottish singer Lena Zavaroni offered the other visible media image of anorexia nervosa during my experience of growing up with the problem. Zavaroni became famous as a child star after singing on the TV talent show *Opportunity Knocks* (1956, 1964–1978, 1987–1990) in 1974, suffered from anorexia from age 13, and subsequently died from complications associated with it following brain surgery to 'cure' her in 1999, age 35. Although I knew of Zavaroni as someone associated with anorexia, this knowledge was confused and unclear: vintage clips from 1970s television, recycled by television itself, as well as Zavaroni's intermittent and prolonged absences from media visibility, led me to believe that she had died from anorexia as a child.

In this regard, I recall particular forms of media encounter, such as watching slow-motion clips of a young Zavaroni and wondering how her youthful exuberance had been starved away; or watching the TV movie *The Karen Carpenter Story* (1989) in 2008, and weeping for the absence of Carpenter's own voice in explaining the experience of her eating disorder (a role historically dominated by her brother Richard, who also produced the film). I know that both Carpenter and Zavaroni also punctuated my Mum's experience of my anorexia. She later told me that Zavaroni's death represented a form of unspeakable horror that was to be managed or contained simply by denial and suppression. She also recalled how a Carpenters' song ominously played on the radio as she packed her bags to come and stay in 2009 when I was admitted to a residential clinic for treatment, a step that ultimately ended my 20-year struggle with anorexia, and led to my recovery and the subsequent birth of my daughter Tabitha in 2011.

I had long since been aware that there existed a body of feminist research on eating disorders, but when I was anorexic I sought to avoid this area in both research and teaching. It felt both too close ('we know why *she's* writing about that ...'), as well as deeply alien or distant (not related to *my* anorexia). After all, anorexia was my life, not a debate or concept, and I was generally hostile to the idea that it could be explained/contained/narrativised within the context of a few journal pages; be that someone's latest publication, or the subject of their Research Excellence Framework (REF) return.

But in 2014, and five years into my recovery, I decided that I no longer felt this way, and it suddenly felt like the right time to bring the history of my once anorexic identity into a public dialogue with my personal and professional self. I decided to write a journal article on stardom and anorexia, the ultimate focus of which became a study of how Zavaroni's anorexia was constructed by the British popular press (1974–1999), as intertwined with aspects of my own experience (Holmes 2015 forthcoming). Within the context of autoethnography, reflection on the process and experience of writing creates what has become known as a 'writing story' (Wall 2008, p. 40); and in detailing aspects of my writing story here, I am concerned with the ways in which the invocation of a personal

connection to a star presents a tricky discourse that sits uneasily with some of the critical and conceptual norms of star and celebrity studies.

Although I was accustomed to writing on stardom and celebrity, the article above represented a new departure for me – both in terms of writing about anorexia, and in bringing a more overtly personal perspective to bear on an academic intervention. Furthermore (and given the media experiences outlined above), I wanted to write about the relationship between stardom/celebrity and anorexia, but in ways that did not focus on discourses of ‘harm’: while the ‘ordinary’ female anorexic is problematically framed as particularly susceptible to media influence (Burke 2006, Saukko 2008), the female celebrity is often constructed as her antagonist in popular discourse – the key figure in the media perpetuation of the slender ‘ideal’. Clearly, neither Carpenter nor Zavaroni ‘made’ me anorexic and (although I have always thought that Carpenter had an extraordinarily beautiful voice), I could not be classed as a ‘fan’ of either of them. Rather, their images had journeyed along with me as I tried to work out what I had and (as the years turned into decades) what might become of me.

But in approaching the new article, I struggled to find a language to frame my experience of these images in ways that did not conform to common-sense discourses about ‘damage’ (as done to the female viewer or anorexic by ‘the media’). To be sure, I did have reservations about the often problematic cultural relations between media, celebrity culture and eating disorders. Although deaths such as Carpenter’s and Zavaroni’s (usefully) highlight the potentially fatal consequences of self-starvation, the existence of an ‘ever growing legion of young stars confessing [to] ... *brushes* with anorexia and bulimia’ (Fox-Kales 2011, p. 37; emphasis added) is more representative of everyday contemporary media coverage. In this respect, the term ‘brushes’ is indicative of the extent to which long-term anorexia (even the ‘average’ case is seen to last around eight years),¹ and the difficulties of recovery, receive far less emphasis in popular media forms. But this does not demand that we conceptualise female celebrities as simple harbingers of ‘copy cat’ starvation, and the cultural factors at work in the cultural production of anorexia are far more complex. In any case, my media encounters with Zavaroni and Carpenter took place in a very different cultural and media climate in which cultural reference points for anorexia were more sporadic and rare. This is in part what made these encounters more meaningful and precious: when I heard Carpenter’s voice I used to try to ‘hear’ the pain of her anorexia within it, and when I looked at images of Zavaroni I wondered whether the inside of her head felt like mine – so invaded by thoughts of flesh, food, scales and starvation that she would have willingly swapped it for the peace and release of death.

The article itself sought to bring critical feminist work on eating disorders into dialogue with theories and approaches from star and celebrity studies. The social constructivist approaches of the feminist work, which seek to depart from psychiatric constructions of anorexia (see Hepworth 1999), and foreground its relationship to the socially constructed nature of female identity, lent themselves quite easily to the case study material, as well as my desire to write myself into the text. Yet, although the critical feminist work on anorexia that explores how its construction functions to mark our normative/‘disordered’ forms of femininity meshed quite seamlessly with work on the construction of female celebrity (Holmes and Negra 2011), I found it considerably harder to approach the case study via concepts and theories from star and celebrity studies. Indeed, during the writing process, I was actually less anxious about disclosing my own experience of anorexia than I was about exploring a personal connection with a celebrity: I felt obliged to keep reminding myself, particularly during moments when I felt sharp

recognition or sorrow, that she was not ‘real’, I did not know her, and that her anorexia only existed – for me – as part of her image (in the tabloid rhetoric of *The Mirror* and *The Sun*, which of course paid the star for the sale of her stories). This anxiety about challenging the conventional rhetoric of star and celebrity studies and somehow transgressing its normative boundaries was intensified by my bid to foreground Lena Zavaroni’s own voice in the media construction of her anorexia – an intervention that doubtless stemmed from my own experience of feeling othered, silenced and dismissed by both medical and popular discourse. In arguing that the voice of the anorexic female celebrity was either ignored in feminist work or positioned as simply commodified and politically ‘inauthentic’, I wanted to listen to what the star said about her own understanding of anorexia, while acknowledging that this was inevitably shaped by, and was part of, popular and psychiatric discourse on anorexia at the time. Again, however, I felt anxious about this, going to great lengths to explain my understanding of this voice as partial and mediated, and ultimately, I suppose, not ‘real’. Yet when I read that her death certificate recorded a verdict of ‘natural causes’ (she was put on a diet at age nine despite being a normal weight, and died following the modern equivalent of a lobotomy when she weighed under four stone), the shock, anger and revulsion that I experienced felt *incredibly real*. I was also unprepared for how some of the particular diagnostic discourses that constructed her anorexia (particularly her lack of fit with a domestic heterosexual norm) so closely mirrored my own, even while acknowledging that such visible accounts play a role in normalising and solidifying particular diagnostic explanations, and recognising that I inhabited aspects of the same historical and political context. In this regard, I found writing the article to be an often difficult balance between wanting to passionately and personally critique her construction and the abhorrent cultural and medical practices to which she was subject, but feeling the need, as a scholar from star and celebrity studies, to maintain my distance and apparent ‘objectivity’ (always referring to her as ‘Zavaroni’ in the article rather than ‘Lena’).

To be sure, both star and celebrity studies have long since foregrounded the potentially complex and meaningful relationships that audiences form with the famous (in terms of identity construction, for example) and found a language to discuss these which is not derisory, dismissive or reductive. Furthermore, the idea of relations with stars and celebrities as simply “‘para-social”, an impoverished and delusional surrogate for “real” social relations’ (Turner 2014, p. 26), has long since been complicated and critiqued. Indeed, these understandings inform my own teaching on celebrity, and students who write about celebrity audiences as simply gullible ‘dupes’ often receive questioning comments in the margin which try to persuade them to rethink the simplicity of this argument.

So why, then, did I find it so difficult to feel confident in approaching and writing about my anorexic connection with Lena Zavaroni? First, the critical and conceptual frameworks mentioned above exist as ways of understanding audiences for stars and celebrities that we – as scholars – place on *other* subjects or participants, not our own subjective and personal investments in celebrities. In this regard (and as has been theorised in the context of the scholar-fan; see Hills 2002), my anxiety here speaks to the difficulty in truly destabilising the implicit hierarchy between academic and ‘audience’ identity. Second, I was perhaps responding to what Matt Hills calls the ‘imagined subjectivity’ of academia, which functions to regulate how we write and for whom (2002, p. 11). Despite the growth of autoethnography and the wider challenge levied at the fallacy of academic ‘objectivity’, this ‘imagined subjectivity’ still makes the intellectual use of the deeply personal rather difficult. But I have focused here on the particular

context of star and celebrity studies, and the extent to which the inclusion of personal narratives may sit especially uneasily with some of the critical and conceptual norms in the field. While foregrounding the extent to which the cultural, political and economic implications of celebrity culture should be taken seriously, the process of interrogation and demystification in the field is still assumed to pivot on intellectual distance and detachment – a normative rhetoric that I found hard to challenge. Finally, it is pertinent to foreground the stubborn persistence of cultural value here. Star and celebrity studies may have reappraised audience investments in star/celebrity culture, but cultural discourse surrounding its status as trivial, shallow and ‘fake’ in nature retains a considerable (everyday) power (particularly where the female subject is concerned).

Holman *et al.* observe how autoethnography intentionally ‘presents a vulnerable subject. Unlike more traditional research methods, secrets are disclosed and histories are made known’ (2013, p. 24). For me, this vulnerability was multi-layered, encompassing not simply the disclosure of ‘private’ self, but the experience of doing so in a particular disciplinary and intellectual context. Whether conceptualised as image, ‘illusion’, commodity or sign, the existence of Lena Zavaroni (and Karen Carpenter) let me know that I was not alone at a time when anorexia was not part of mainstream mass consciousness. If autoethnography seeks to ‘illustrate why the personal is important in our understanding of cultural life’ (2013, p. 33), then this is my illustration of how a particular star became valuable to me as I inhabited the identities of woman, anorexic, and academic. Ultimately, however, although this piece has been about the difficulty of finding ‘voice’ (or the right kind of voice in the right kind of context), I also know that I am just lucky to be here to tell the tale.

Between the personal and the academic: me, Mum and Audrey Hepburn

Sarah Ralph

I’ve grown accustomed to her look; accustomed to her voice; accustomed to her face.²

I have a memory of watching Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (1964) with my Mum on a Sunday afternoon when I was about nine years old. We snuggled up on the sofa together and I was entranced for a few hours by musical numbers, beautiful flowing dresses and Hepburn’s elfin elegance and loveliness. There have been many occasions over the years when my Mum and I have watched films together – those starring Hepburn and Marilyn Monroe particularly – but this memory is a special one for me. What is perhaps most interesting about it is that I am not at all certain that it is an accurate one. My Mum is similarly ‘hazy’ about whether it is a factual memory, although she recalls that we often watched Hepburn films together during my childhood, and that we certainly watched *My Fair Lady* on several occasions. Yet whether the memory is ‘true’ or not is in many ways unimportant. It is a psychological truth for me, and it is from the construct of this shared experience with my Mum that I date my enthusiasm for Hepburn, who has remained a ‘favourite’ film star for many years. As scholars of oral history and memory have argued, the reality of a remembered event is in many ways less significant than the way in which the event is remembered by people from their present-day viewpoint, and may disclose more than a completely faithful narrative (Portelli 1981, p. 100).

As an adult I have habitually been bought gifts and collectables relating to Hepburn, first by family and then friends: biographies, picture books, DVD box-sets, a passport cover, and even several pairs of Audrey Hepburn socks. The shared passion my Mum and

I have for Hepburn, and the memories associated with it, are consciously sustained and renewed through the act of giving and receiving of these tangible objects (for more on collecting cultures and nostalgia, see Geraghty 2014). During the course of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Aberystwyth University, I would also receive regular telephone calls from Mum telling me that a Hepburn film was scheduled for television or that an article about her in a newspaper or magazine had been kept aside for me to read on my next visit home. Our mutual love of Hepburn has been an important connection in our relationship for more than two decades, a sedimented topic of talk in our mother–daughter interactions, and was the personal motivation to conduct my doctoral research project on mother–daughter relations to film stars (see Ralph in this issue).

I was not the first female film academic to take scholarly inspiration from shared mother–daughter times watching films with favourite stars. In Rachel Moseley's book *Growing Up With Audrey Hepburn* she acknowledges that her own fascination with Hepburn was initiated by watching old films on television with her mother (Moseley 2002, p. 175). Similarly, an interview in *The Guardian* (26 May 2009) quotes Linda Ruth Williams thus:

Some Like It Hot and *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* were films that I watched with my Mum, sitting on the sofa on a Sunday afternoon back home in Bristol [...] Now I'm using them to get third years up to speed on theories of stardom.³

Helen Taylor, in her study of the meanings and significances of *Gone With The Wind* in women's lives, writes of how the book and the film 'spoke to my strong emotional attachment to my mother' (Taylor 1989, p. 9). Yet, like Richard Dyer's above-mentioned personal disclosures on Marilyn Monroe and Montgomery Clift, these mentions are discrete and dispersed reflections within broader academic analyses or intended for a non-academic readership, rather than being key to the framing or methodological approach of an intellectual enquiry. A 'light touch' reference or two, such as in these examples, might demonstrate a negotiated attempt to point to a personal interest and history, but without potentially risking presenting oneself as 'embarrassingly egotistical or gee-whiz celebratory' (Doty 2000, p. 12).

Like Su above, I recognise the hesitancy to bring into clear view personal connections to a star, particularly when there is also a close and significant relationship involved, such as there might be between a scholar and their mother. The fear of the legitimacy and reliability of your research being challenged is all the more heightened when a star-related interest moves beyond fan enthusiasm and expands to include intimate family history and affective encounters, and means disclosing – as a consequence – the personal and emotional experiences of another individual who is outside the academy. Through the course of my doctoral project, the trilateral relationship between Hepburn, my mother and myself was the bedrock that kept me motivated and driven, even when the common anxieties of the thesis research and writing process threatened to derail me. It was ever-present emotionally. Yet the degree to which I felt able to acknowledge this within the research apparatuses, methodological processes and the written thesis itself, varied considerably. As stated by Glesne, autoethnography 'begins with the self, the personal biography' and uses 'narratives of the self' in order to say something about a 'larger cultural setting' (2006, p. 199). The preceding paragraphs briefly account for my own 'personal biography' in relation to the topic of mother–daughter relations to film stars. My approach for the remainder of this piece is to present a 'narrative of the self' in terms of the reasons and ways in which I wrote the relationship between me, Mum and Audrey Hepburn in – but

also out – of my research project at key moments, and how this relates specifically to the positioning of myself as a researcher within the sphere of star and celebrity studies and audience research for addressees both inside and outside the academy.

My doctoral research project was conducted in two phases: a preliminary online pair of questionnaires for mothers and daughters to complete, followed by a series of in-depth follow-up interviews with selected mothers and daughters who had responded to the survey. The questionnaires were hosted at a specially designed website.⁴ This had a welcome page that summarised briefly what I was setting out to research and why, and provided some essential information on completing the questionnaire. Additionally, however, the welcome page provided a hyperlink to a side page offering information about myself and my personal motives for wanting to conduct the research, as well as a fuller explanation of the academic background to the study. In providing these details I hoped to demonstrate to potential respondents that I was not attempting to scrutinise their relationships and behaviours from the position of an expert outsider, but as an academic who was also a daughter with a passion for a star that I shared with my own mother. Here, declaring my personal biography was a methodological strategy; a conscious tactic for setting people coming to the website at ease by explicitly demonstrating that one of the underlying motivations for conducting the research was a personal inquisitiveness to find out if there were other women – other daughters – who were ‘like me’, or indeed those who had had different experiences. This purposeful informality of address was also replicated in the project press release and participant recruitment letter that was published in a range of local newspapers across the UK, in *Woman’s Weekly* magazine, and disseminated to selected online platforms (such as Facebook and Mumsnet).

Such autobiographical admissions made in the public domain, while a necessary and often effective method for recruiting participants for this kind of empirical research, leave the researcher very open to judgement by a popular press predisposed to be sceptical of research on popular culture, and keen to highlight examples of the purported ‘dumbing down’ of academia. Barker and Brooks (1998) and Laurie Schulze (1999) have accounted for their research, on *Judge Dredd* (1995) and Madonna respectively, being ‘trashed’ by the press in this way. As noted in the Introduction, the risk of harsh judgement is amplified when the research topic – film stardom and celebrity – is one that is positioned as being ‘inferior’ (and notably feminised) even within an already derided academic discipline. Perhaps, therefore, I should have anticipated that the research might be met by instances of media scorn, but I confess that I did not. I felt that as this was a doctoral research project and not a more high-profile, collaborative research study by academic ‘names’, I would manage to avoid a media debunking. Yet my published request for mothers and daughters to participate in one local newspaper led to a comeback by a columnist in the following week’s publication that played directly into these public discourses and debates about the ‘worth’ of studying popular culture and declining standards in academia. My research, the columnist Charlotte Hofton wrote, was surely ‘the kind of thing that can be covered in a single girly evening over a few bottles of Chardonnay?’ and was ‘not exactly going to rock even the currently dumbed-down academic world’.⁵ The fact that Hofton’s criticism also constructs the research as ‘girly’ demonstrates the pervasiveness of established discourses that frame consumers of star and celebrity culture as not just female but feminine, young and passive. These being the very same discourses whose operation in both the academy and the public domain make the task of writing reflectively about one’s own relationship with a preferred star or celebrity more difficult for a woman scholar, especially an early-career scholar such as myself.

Hofton's assault on my research as being trivial even in the already 'dumbed-down academic world' resonated with the rising onslaught on 'media studies' as a subject by the print and broadcast media, and thus in many ways I felt that my work drawing such criticism was a 'badge of honour' as a media and cultural studies' scholar. Even the fact that the column piece demonstrated the stubborn resilience of 'common-sense' judgements of cultural value in relation to star and celebrity culture, I managed to dismiss with relative indifference and resignation after a short period of bristling. However, I was unprepared for how personally I would take Hofton's criticism with respect to my relationship with my Mum, and our shared appreciation of Hepburn. While the column piece made no explicit mention of my personal motivations for undertaking the study, the fact that Hofton was dismissive of the very idea of researching experiences and interactions between mothers and daughters about film stars felt like an attack on occasions and memories that possess immense personal significance and meaning for me, and likewise for my Mum. Furthermore, by the time this column piece had been published the online questionnaire had begun to yield responses from mother-daughter participants, and I felt protective of the personal experiences and interactions that were being shared with me. Hofton's belittling of the value of exploring such experiences evoked in me a resolute determination to let these and other women's voices be heard. This personal resolve, however, created a particularly complicated relationship between myself, as an academic researcher, with a sensed need to maintain a detached and 'objective' analytical perspective on the responses elicited by the research questionnaire, and my own personal experience as a daughter and Audrey Hepburn fan.

In both the mother and daughter versions of the questionnaire, I asked respondents to list their three favourite film stars 'in order of preference'. During the period that the questionnaire was online, I was able to view mothers' and daughters' responses as they were submitted, and thus from quite early on in the research process began to notice an interesting trend. I had expected, no doubt influenced by my own personal experience and also by the preoccupations of academic literature on the subject (Stacey 1994, Moseley 2002), that star appreciation – and particularly shared admiration between women – would predominantly be directed towards female stars. Yet I was struck while reading through paired responses in the database by the large proportion of respondents selecting male stars as their favourites. As it later emerged, gender preferences with regard to film stars were a highly significant factor as a means of representing or demonstrating a particular class identity (See Ralph [forthcoming 2015](#)). The realisation that the fervent and highly personal position I had begun to adopt towards my research might lead to similar assumptions being made with regard to my research materials, in presupposing that my respondents were indeed 'like me', prompted a crucial rethinking of the way in which I approached the questionnaire data. The importance of taking myself out of the research process again when analysing the survey data was clearly emphasised, in order to ensure that assumptions such as these based on my own personal biography did not recur. This was less a case of actively forgetting my personal connection or striving to maintain 'objectivity' – which as Su notes in this piece, is now challenged as a misleading notion – and more about, as consciously as possible, coming to the participants' responses with an open mind and a structured framework for analysis.

In the 'hokey-cokey' dance that I was developing with my research project, the next move towards placing myself back in to my research came at the much later point of sourcing an appropriate technique of discourse analysis to apply to the qualitative telephone interview materials that had resulted from the second phase of my research project. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach was selected because of its

organised yet flexible guidelines for analysing discursive materials, which it was possible to tailor to the specific objectives of a research project. Furthermore, however, IPA is an approach that specifically suggests that a researcher makes explicit their own world-view. The aim of IPA is to investigate in detail people's accounts of their personal experiences and explore how they make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith and Osborn 2008, p. 53). IPA sees research as a dynamic process with the researcher undertaking a necessarily active and dual role. It acknowledges that an exploration of this type inevitably implicates the researcher's own world-view, and thus involves a two-stage interpretation process or a double hermeneutic (Smith and Eatough 2007, p. 36). Put simply, the analysis produced by the researcher is an interpretation of the participant's interpretation of his or her experiences. So, recognising that the presuppositions and assumptions of the phenomenological researcher can never entirely be suspended during analysis, IPA importantly advocates a reflexive examination of their own perspective on the phenomenon under study (Willig 2008, p. 56). In other words, IPA gives weight to the notion of researcher explicitness. In particular, it recommends that a researcher accounts for their own perspective on the topic being researched, and this resonated especially with my experience of my doctoral research. IPA thus presented me with the opportunity to be very open about my personal motivations, and the presuppositions and perceptions that my personal biography would inevitably bring; to reflect upon my assumptions and incorporate them into my research account.

However, while IPA offered me this opportunity, I am not necessarily sure that I in the end managed to achieve the integration that the approach suggests in the write-up of my research. Ultimately I only really 'wrote myself' back into the thesis in its introduction, and made sporadic 'light touch' mentions – akin to those by Taylor and Moseley – in the main body of the document. Schulze notes that in writing autobiographically of her own Madonna fandom 'that "real" academics would not think of me as one of their own' (1999, p. 47), and my own feeling at the write-up stage of my research echoed such sentiments. However, in revisiting my thesis for this piece, I did note how in one place – my thesis acknowledgements – the relationship between me, Mum and Audrey Hepburn remains prominent, captured in what Stacey refers to as a 'frozen moment' (1994, p. 67); a nostalgic memory seemingly not situated in sequential time:

Mum, thank you for bestowing on me your 'way with words' and a stubborn determination to succeed. But most of all thank you for the many shared hours of snuggling on the sofa with the countless wonderful movies we have enjoyed together during our lifetime as mother and daughter. But my biggest thank you ... is for giving me Audrey.

Aesthetic autoethnography: dancing with Ian Curtis

Sean Redmond

As acknowledged in the Introduction, after what are 162 pages of brilliant cultural, ideological and semiotic analysis, Richard Dyer concludes *Stars* with the admission that whenever he gazes upon Marilyn Monroe he catches his breath, or that whenever he sees Montgomery Clift he sighs over how beautiful he is. I have often thought that was the perfect first sentence for 'Stars 2', or for the beginning of a sensory exploration – the haptic sight and erotic breath – of stardom and its affects and emotional power on those who are caught up in its intimate callings.

Of course, ‘Stars 2’ never emerged in the field, and much of the recent material that has addressed the intimate relationship between a star or celebrity and the audience has been done through intellectual and methodological frameworks that want to account for such intimacy by way of the parasocial and the second-hand (see Rojek 2001, 2012). Further, within the field of celebrity studies, and culture studies more broadly, intimacy has nearly always been read as being in the service of something else – the political economy (Turner 2014), neo-liberalism (Littler 2008), identity politics (Negra 2001), spectacle (Kellner 2009), and liquid modernity (in some of my own work; Redmond 2010). Such approaches deny, as a consequence, the possibility that engagement with a celebrity can involve intense experiential connectivity, made out of sensory materials not irreducible to simple theories of mediation. It is in wanting to discover the raw truth of this intimate engagement with the famous that led me to employ sensory or aesthetic autoethnography to better make sense of the connections that are forged when we are faced with a celebrity figure that moves (within) us.

My approach to celebrity autoethnography is two-fold. Firstly, it involves a call for scholars and practitioners to look closely at sensory aesthetics, and sensuous knowledge (Eagleton 1990, Pink 2009). This is because I take or start from the position that our encounters with celebrity are sensorial and multi-modal, involve joy and pleasure, and at their most heightened are asemiotic – activated in and through feeling alone. I also suggest that in these immersive encounters there exists the potential for the radicalisation of the body, or a type of becoming that creates the conditions to free the self from its normally constituted docility and entrapment. What I am calling sensing celebrity aesthetics is not just then about the poetics of the celebrity figure; a call to analyse light, colour, dress, setting, and non-representational signifiers. It is an approach also centrally concerned with recognising the politics of sensuous embodiment in which one can see in that intimate celebrity moment a liberating emergence of the carnal body (Sobchack 2004).

Second, my approach involves the method of storying the self (Finnegan 1997) where people are asked to recount their encounters with celebrity through memorial work and personal narratives. These stories, however, are born from textural qualities; draw upon synaesthesia and co-synaesthetic relations. This is something I have defined as involving the self creating the celebaesthetic subject through the process of recounting and reliving the senses of celebrity identification (Redmond 2014). Put rather simply, our encounter with celebrities is embodied as is our memories of them. We draw upon our full sensorium to experience the wonder (and terror) of them. In remembering them, we draw upon sensuous and sensory memory.

I suggest, then, that to properly understand the way celebrities make sense-based meaning, one also needs then to recognise the role of autoethnography in the consumer/fans’ relationships with famed images. For example, I have written about the personal impact of Sam Taylor-Wood’s photograph of Daniel Craig because of the way his wedding band activated a poignant affective memory that mine is long gone. In sensing the punctum of the photograph I felt the weight, cold and colour of the ring missing from my finger (Redmond 2014). Sensing celebrities, then, is uniquely personal.

Celebrity culture is in effect an affective constituent of storying the self: where our identities in part emerge from the ways in which we weave them into the fabric of our everyday lives. They help us tell stories, live stories, and to embody the stories we tell one another. These are stories of hope, fear and hurt, and aspiration, love, friendship and growth, powerfully cast in starry narrative form. This is what I think we should be interested in: the ‘micro’ stories that emerge from the consumption of celebrity culture; made in the moment of the live, and which originate from what the person is feeling,

going through, and memorialising at that time in their life. One's living biography is powerfully brought into the open through these shared stories, and these stories grow, as new content is added, and the self grows with it (Redmond 2014).

I story my life in part through celebrity figures I identify with. For example, my own Facebook feed is testament to the way I story my feelings, memories and emotional state through my celebrity postings. You can see the schedule and programming of my moods, interests and obsessions through my Facebook celebrity stories. When I am blue and hurt and missing a lover temporarily absent or perhaps long gone, I post songs and movie clips that speak that truth or which (secretly) connected us in some way. These are songs and memories that create in me a sea of synaesthetic affects – they wash my body in the memories they evoke. Celebrity threads – taut, loose, and barely visible to the naked eye – emerge across the life of my page. When a particular affecting content hits my feed or I find it elsewhere, I make sense of it in terms of my own biography. I story the stories I encounter, inserting myself into them, and them into my life.

These are not just macro stories but micro moments crystallised in terms of proximity and distance, self-worth and self – belonging, fleshed out of the sights, smells, spaces and places that the celebrity and I are found in. As such, a complex picture of my psychology emerges from exploring the storied detail contained in each feed and through the cross-fertilisation that is carried on continually in the tapestry that marks Facebook out as a site of the social media. The truth is that the uneven truth of my selfhood has begun to be storied on my Facebook celebrity postings.

Let me now tell you an aesthetic autoethnographic story to charge my discussion with the intimate qualities I suggest this approach brings into the warm light of the day.

I need to dance with Ian Curtis

In the *Something Else* live footage of Joy Division playing *Transmission*, we witness the late Ian Curtis dance, dance, dance to the tune or guitar-driven noise of the titular track. Images or videos of damaged celebrities are always endowed with real power, particularly with a figure such as Ian who committed suicide, and whose biography was laced with pain and anguish. Ian was an anti-star, suffered from epilepsy, and was involved in a traumatic relationship with his girlfriend of the time. This is the last and only nationally UK broadcast TV appearance by Joy Division and as such has been given irreverent status by fans such as myself.

However, I think these anchoring frameworks that I have just supplied are not entirely necessary to get to the poetic sensibility of the live performance and its phenomenal star before us – that can be achieved through the work of celebrity aesthetics and aesthetic autoethnography.

The recording is a classic live-piece studio set: the audience barely respond as they might do if this was a gig in a sweaty club in the industrial heartland of northern England. However, there is a swaying as the song and the band's performance build and take the audience over or under its spell. As the song starts up, the band turns in on itself, with a looking down and a focusing inwards, as if they are playing for and within themselves. This is a brooding, macabre performance supported by a track that is made up of only two or three chord changes but whose sonic and sonorous potential is, for me, simply overwhelming.

The beat is relentless, the lyrics haunting, and the vocals growl and harmonise in a frenetic discordant way. Ian, the front man, is of course the centre of attention, constantly returned to in medium or close up shot, his face full of anguish and unexplainable terror. It

his embodied performance that takes me to the heart of the matter since he seems to exist in a state of immanence and transcendence – an inner and outer physicality – that shatters the confines of his body and this (my) body lost in the transformative experience. This performance is all about sensuous impression and expressive feeling.

Vivian Sobchack suggests:

That as lived bodies we are always grounded in the radical materialism of bodily immanence, in the here and now of our sensorial existence – and this no matter how different our cultural situations or differently organized and valued modes of making sense. However, as lived bodies, we always also have the capacity for transcendence: for a unique exteriority of being – an *ex stasis* – that locates us elsewhere and otherwise even as it is grounded in and tethered to our lived body's here and now. That is, our ontological capacity for transcendence emerges from and in our ontic immanence. This is an experience of transcendence in immanence. (2008, p. 200)

Ian's hypnotic performance demonstrates this capacity for simultaneous immanence and transcendence; he is angular and thin, initially static and controlled and yet already caught by the music, the song, as he begins to sway, emote, slightly feverish in his appearance. His eyes remain half closed and crescent shaped, and his eyeballs roll.

He is an affecting and affected body on the stage. Of course as the music builds, and the chorus repeats, as the song and music take a tighter grip on him (and him on the song, the music, the vocal delivery), he seems less present rather than more. It feels as if he is not really on the stage, in the room with us at all, but has been taken to a higher truth, to a new plane of experience and existence.

This of course becomes the sensorial appreciation of the Ian Curtis dance: jagged, discordant, agitated, aggressive but thoughtless, only felt, lived as if it is a becoming minor in the Deleuzian sense, in the flood and flow of the music. Ian sings/shouts 'there is no language, just sound, that's all we need to know, to synchronise love to the beat of the show'.

I sense that, for him, music and the dance he devotes to it are an asemiotic encounter in which the constraints and conditioning of the body have been left behind, transcended, transgressed. I experience the clip/the song/Ian in the same way – as a sensuous aesthetic, and composed of blocs of sensation. This for me is an intensive experience, a radical becoming in which the immanent me is transcended.

For Deleuze, a minor literature is not one that belongs to a marginal or marginalised group, and neither is it a literature that exists outside the dominant canon. Minor literature subverts and recasts dominant language to create new potential and new possibilities in the very act of making-meaning. As Bogue notes, for Deleuze these shimmering 'lines of flight':

Involves a certain kind of becoming: becoming-imperceptible. Becoming-imperceptible is a process of elimination whereby one divests oneself of all coded identity and engages in the abstract lines of a nonorganic life, the immanent, virtual lines of continuous variation that play through discursive regimes of signs and nondiscursive machinic assemblages alike. (2004, p. 73)

In short, minor literature generates a type of experience that breaks through the normative and conventional, creating what Deleuze (2002) calls 'the virtual'. This is what I sense is happening in Ian's performance and in my own responsive becoming minor. I danced with Ian Curtis and became something more or less virtual.

This becoming minor resonates with my own troubled sense of alienation and loneliness that has haunted me for as long as I can remember. Even when surrounded by

friends, sitting with a pretty girl or on a high after a successful presentation, I can feel terribly alone. I call this my loneliness room (Redmond 2014). I have rarely felt comfortable in my own skin, and so Ian provides me with a form of embodiment that stings me, enwraps me, and sets me free, free, free

Sensing celebrities involves recognition of the way complimentary sensory-based elements come together to create, produce and transmit levels of affect and intensities. The approach recognises the cross-modal nature of identification, and the way the body readily escapes its own docility and entrapment. I see transgressive and positive outcomes from the way the celebaesthetic subject operates and have used the example of dancing with Ian Curtis to anchor the way resistance is brought into corporeal being.

We escape through, in and within celebrity, and not through some fantasy mechanism, or parasocial fakery. We escape because our bodies and their senses are activated in intense and affecting ways that cannot be simply used up or be recuperated by dominant ideology. We escape because the conditions of our existence demand it of us even as it attempts to regulate us and control us. In sensing celebrities we can get beyond the constraints and impositions of ideology and discourse, finding new ways to be in the world.

Julia Kristeva (writing about contemporary installations at the Venice Biennale) suggests that:

In an installation it is the body in its entirety which is asked to participate through its sensations, through vision obviously, but also hearing, touch, and on occasions smell. As if these artists, in the place of an object sought to place us in a space at the limits of the sacred, and asked us not to contemplate images but to communicate with beings. I had the impression, she writes, that [the artists] were communicating this: that the ultimate aim of art is perhaps what was formerly celebrated under the term of incarnation. I mean by that a wish to make us feel, through the abstractions, the forms, the colours, the volumes, the sensations, a *real experience*. (Cited in Bann 1998, p. 69; original emphasis)

This, I would like to suggest, might be the project of celebrity aesthetics: to see it as (one of) its functions: to activate our intensive register, to reconnect us in new and profound and perhaps liberating ways with the world. Further, it involves the recognition that the power of employing aesthetic autoethnography rests with its ability to give people the space to tell their own stories and to express their connection with celebrity through the shimmering streams of feeling. This approach necessarily resists a top-down model where an ideological and cultural reading is simply imposed upon texts and audiences and fans.

There are moments in time and space, and in the arteries and veins of the everyday and the everywhere, where we can escape the ideological conditions under which we normally exist. The celebaesthetic encounter with the celebrity can produce such immanent and transcendent moments:

Listen to the silence, let it ring on. Eyes, dark grey lenses frightened of the sun. We would have a fine time living in the night, Left to blind destruction, Waiting for our sight. (Joy Division, Transmission)

Conclusion

The three narratives we have offered here raise a great many issues about the tensions, difficulties and yet also pleasures in the relationship between star/celebrity studies and autoethnography. While Su and Sarah's stories reflect acutely on the difficulties involved in speaking the self in this disciplinary context (which may reflect back on questions of

gender), Sean and Su's narratives both foreground the importance of how star/celebrity encounters are embodied – experienced with and through the body in a way that problematises simplistic notions of identification. Sarah and Sean's accounts, albeit in different ways, both offer insight into the ways in which stars and celebrities are 'company' in ways that cannot be explained by recourse to a parasocial paradigm.

But in swivelling the spotlight onto ourselves, we are aware that autoethnography 'intentionally presents a vulnerable subject' (Holman Jones *et al.* 2013, p. 24). Part of this vulnerability is allowing stories of the self to me made available for the reader to make of them what they will, in terms of interpretation, judgement or significance.

Notes

1. <http://www.b-eat.co.uk/about-beat/media-centre/facts-and-figures/> [Accessed 29 September 2014].
2. From 'I've Grown Accustomed to Her Face', *My Fair Lady*. Music by Frederick Loewe and lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner. Performed by Rex Harrison.
3. <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2009/may/26/interview-linda-ruth-williams> [Accessed 9 November 2014].
4. www.watchingwithmother.co.uk [Accessed 25 November 2014].
5. <http://www.iwcp.co.uk/news/beating-bags-wont-wrap-up-our-ills-18652.aspx> [Accessed 10 November 2014].

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