

Hollywood Icons

Contemporary Film Stars in Celebrity Genres

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Abstract

This article is an analysis of how Hollywood stars are represented in three central celebrity genres – the fashion magazine interview, the endorsement advertisement and the appearance of the red carpet live broadcast. In contrast to recent research in celebrity culture this is an investigation of how specific media texts articulate key concepts central to an understanding of contemporary celebrity culture such as the star as both ordinary and extraordinary, the star as resource and the notion of intimacy at a distance. Thus the article offers a useful framework for analysis of traditional celebrity genres and how Hollywood icons - in this context exemplified by Benedict Cumberbatch and Lupita Nyong'o - are represented.

Keywords celebrity culture, media genre, Hollywood stardom, portrait interviews, endorsements, red carpet appearance

This article analyses how contemporary Hollywood stars are represented in different ways in three key celebrity genres: the fashion magazine interview, the endorsement advertisement, and the appearance on the red carpet live broadcast. In contrast to existing

research in celebrity studies (most recently by Redmond (2013), Rojek (2013), and Gibson (2013)), this is a 'bottom up' study of how specific media texts articulate central concepts from theories of contemporary celebrity culture in general and Hollywood stardom in particular. In this study, the focus is on how the singular media text in specific genres articulates stardom within digital media culture. First, I discuss three key concepts within celebrity culture theory for the analysis of celebrity genres. These include the notions of ordinariness and extraordinariness (Dyer 1979), intimacy at a distance (Thompson 1996), and the stars as a resource (Stacey 1994, Redmond 2013). Then I characterise the three genres and how they articulate Hollywood stardom in celebrity culture: As examples of the star image in contemporary Hollywood, I have chosen British actor Benedict Cumberbatch and Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong'o, both of whom are depicted in these three particular genres and are relatively new stars still working on their image. The fashion magazine interview is exemplified by Nyong'o and Cumberbatch interviews in the fashion and lifestyle magazines *Vogue* and *GQ* respectively. The endorsement advertisement genre includes their respective advertisements for cosmetics house Lancôme and car manufacturer Jaguar. Finally, red carpet footage of both stars derives from the live broadcast of the 2014 Academy Awards. I will begin, however, by presenting the three key concepts of celebrity culture theory: the star as ordinary and extraordinary, intimacy at a distance, and the star as a resource.

Transcendence: The star as ordinary and extraordinary

The Hollywood star is something special – a celebrity of merit as Chris Rojek (2001) has argued. In his seminal study of stars and their images, Richard Dyer (1979) characterises the star image as a combination of the 'ordinary' and the 'extra ordinary'. This apparent contradiction in terms characterises the composite nature of the star image: The star needs to simultaneously have an element that we can recognise and with which we can identify as well as an element of 'extraordinariness' that makes the star stand out. The audience needs to be able to relate to the star even though he or she has a lavish and glamorous lifestyle, designer clothes, and opulent mansion. An important part of the logic of the star image, however, is also that this lifestyle and extraordinariness can only be achieved

through hard work and professionalism as well as the ability to seize an opportunity in order to get a break. The point is that only by combining the ordinary and the extraordinary can stars appeal to the audience. This contradiction is central to understanding the celebrity genre because it pinpoints how Hollywood stars of today are supposed to simultaneously integrate otherworldliness and exceptionalism with everyday life and scrutiny from the tabloid press. Even though the tabloid media plays an important role in presenting Hollywood stars to the public, the ubiquity of Hollywood stars in entertainment media more broadly coincides with the accessibility of other celebrity genres, suggesting that extraordinariness is still the main attraction for the audience. The tabloids are important in presenting the star image, but it still seems that the celebrity genres in which the celebrity willingly participates as 'part of the job' are key to how the image is established. Interest in the ordinary or in peeking behind the façade, as it were, is only present if the extraordinary is in place. Rojek even argues that the reason for the ubiquity of celebrity culture – and by extension, the presence of Hollywood stars – is that it "affords access to the deep human need for transcendence and meaning" (Rojek 2013: 178). In other words, Dyer's concept of the ordinary and the extraordinary are co-dependent elements of the attraction to and our theoretical understanding of the Hollywood star.

Distance: Up close and personal from afar

The relationship between the audience and the Hollywood star has, in a technological sense, been diminished because the social media makes possible direct communication between the Hollywood star and audience if the star has his or her own Twitter account or website. The circuit of information about celebrity has added an extra dimension since the individual Hollywood star can establish his or her own agenda and target a key audience. The Hollywood star is dependent on interest from the audience, a relationship that Rojek calls 'abstract desire', a desire that is dependent on distance (Rojek 2001). In broader sociological terms, John B. Thompson supports the notion of a mandatory distance between star and audience in his interpretation of Horton and Wohl's concept of para-social communication in television (Thompson 1995). Thompson argues that this 'intimacy at a distance' is established when audiences have a

para-social relationship with media journalists and hosts. Thompson further argues that this para-social intimacy at a distance can have the advantage of making it less stressful to follow the private and public lives of film stars in the media than to engage in demanding interactions in real-life relationships (Thompson 1995). This notion is supported by empirical work that concludes that audience members take different kinds of pleasure in following celebrities through the media, ranging from regarding them as keeping an eye on a distant relative to the more cynical enjoyment when stars fall from grace (Gamson 1994, Hermes 1995). As a mediated celebrity, the Hollywood star is thus always accessible – in forms both fictional and factual – but never demanding.

Resource: Fashionable stars

There is a long Hollywood tradition of connecting the stars with the fashion industry. This was established very early on along with the star system (Cosgrave 2006, Mosely 2005). In the beginning, fashionable clothes were made for the star by the studios and costume designers such as Edith Head and Adrian, and copies of stars' costumes were produced for the public by the studios as well (Eckert 1991). From the late 1950s, European fashion designers dressed stars on and off the screen. In her study of post-war British female film fans, Jackie Stacey makes a useful distinction between what she calls 'cinematic identification' – that is, engaging in the character while at the cinema – and the extra-cinematic identification that takes place outside the cinema and concerns engaging with the star and with the character she plays. Stacey argues that this extra-cinematic identification concerns fashion and hairstyle as well as being inspired by strong female roles and how they stand up for themselves. It was as much a question of translating the glamorous looks of Hollywood to post-war Britain as of being inspired by meaningful characters on screen. Analysing fashion in relation to Hollywood today in *Fashion and Celebrity Culture* (2012), Gibson argues that what stars wear off screen (at premiers, award shows, and in fashion magazines) is now just as – if not more – important than what they wear on screen (Gibson 2012: 69). Still, the notion of extra-cinematic identification is relevant because of the star's important role in film promotion and the necessity of maintaining high media visibility on and off screen.

I) The fashion magazine interview

In order to understand the genre of the fashion magazine interview, the starting point must be Leo Lowenthal's seminal study of magazine biographies or celebrity portraits, informed by the Frankfurt School's critical theory (Lowenthal 2006). Lowenthal detects in 1940s a shift in the type of celebrities that the magazines portray – a shift from portraying 'idols of production' to favouring 'idols of consumption', that is, a shift from portraying public figures who contribute to society in terms of being businessmen or politicians to portraying athletes and actors who are consumed by the public. As an adherent to critical theory, Lowenthal understands this development as indicative of decline in terms of the appreciation and definition of accomplishment in society. In contrast to this understanding, Charles Ponce de Leon regards the celebrity interview as a journalistic human-interest genre with certain properties. Ponce de Leon argues that interviews with celebrities have changed from interviewing great heroes to interviewing celebrities as flawed individuals: Celebrities are characterised just like ordinary people in order to invite the reader to identify with the celebrity as well as to get a glimpse of what the celebrity is 'really like' (Ponce De Leon 2002). The manner in which journalists conduct interviews has also changed from gathering information about the celebrity to regular interviews with him or her at home or in similar everyday surroundings, thereby entering the realm of the celebrity's private life. The interview is a chance to portray 'the true self' of the Hollywood star because this genre offers journalists 'unique opportunities to moralize and to promote values and ideological agendas under the guise of entertainment' (Ponce de Leon 2002).

The celebrity interview and, by extension, the fashion magazine interview consist of five basic elements according to Ponce de Leon (2002) and Marshall (2006): self-improvement, fame and consequences, 'meeting the star', lifestyle indicators, and 'behind the scenes'. 'Self-improvement' is usually considered admirable and productive. 'Fame and consequences' usually entails some reflection on why wealth and fame are not considered important or why happiness is not dependent on those factors. 'Meeting the star' is often described in detail in terms of where the interview is taking place and under which circumstances. Descriptions of lifestyle indicators focus on the personal rituals of the Hollywood star: what he

or she is wearing at the meeting and how it is similar to/different from the way in which the public is accustomed to seeing her/him. The 'behind the scenes' section of the interview reveals the Hollywood star's rendition of what it was like to work on this particular production. The additional sixth element is the fashion shoot, where the star wears the latest fashion and is connected with the discourse of the fashion magazine. Here, the film star's professional skills of transforming her/his appearance are used. The Hollywood star is also usually on the cover of the magazine as well.

This is the case with Benedict Cumberbatch for British *GQ* (December 2013) and Lupita Nyong'o for American *Vogue* (July 2014), who are both on the cover of their respective magazines. In Lupita Nyong'o's interview, 'Lupita Nyong'o on winning the Oscar, becoming the face of Lancôme, and her first cover of *Vogue*', self-improvement is addressed in terms of her education as a Yale alumni, her personal drive, and her privileged upbringing. Regarding fame and consequences, Nyong'o asserts that she has used her new status in a positive way as "the newest golden girl of Hollywood." Nyong'o is reported as saying that she actively wants to be a positive role model for young black women. 'Meeting the star' takes place in the context of a *Vogue* photo shoot that emphasises her pleasant and unspoiled demeanour, which is also remarked upon by the journalist. 'Lifestyle indicators' are addressed in terms of her interest in fashion and her success in hiring a skilled stylist to pick out the right clothes for her purportedly 50+ appearances in connection with *12 Years a Slave*. The fashion shoot takes place on location in Morocco and depicts Nyong'o as simultaneously smiling, glamorous, and cool in luxurious surroundings as well as picturesque environments. In the 'behind the scenes' section, she sings the praises of her director Steve McQueen. The journalist's ideological position seems to be one of enthusiasm and admiration, and he regards Nyong'o as very nearly entitled to her success. In 'The many lives of Benedict Cumberbatch' in *GQ* (December 2013), the studio photo shoot depicts Cumberbatch with a serious stiff upper-lip expression and dressed primarily in contemporary men's outerwear, with plaid and wool linking the images to his Sherlock Holmes persona. Nevertheless, the journalist characterises Cumberbatch as well groomed with a pleasant demeanour and eagerness to talk. Self-improvement is addressed because Cumberbatch shares his experience of being

kidnapped abroad and fearing for his life a few years back and how he afterwards coped with the traumatic incident. Regarding fame and its consequences, he has experienced the unpleasantness of being unable to control people's perceptions of him. 'Meeting the star' is a section that takes up a large portion of the interview, giving the impression that the journalist and Cumberbatch almost become friends of a sort. 'Lifestyle indicators' include his fatigue with what he calls 'posh bashing' in the British media, which hold his upper-middle class background against him. "Behind the scenes" is primarily presented as additional quotes from the team behind the TV series *Sherlock*. The ideological position of the journalist seems to be that Cumberbatch is amiable and highly conscientious, in contrast to the stiff upper lip that he has been accused of presenting. This is, however, somewhat contradicted by the style of the photo shoot.

In various ways, the two interviews address all three celebrity theory concepts, though there seems to be a strong focus on the concept of the 'stars as a resource' in terms of lifestyle indicators and personal improvement and less in terms of consumption of the high-fashion clothes presented in photo shoots. The 'ordinary' dimension of the star image is addressed in the stars' coping strategies and the determination whereas the 'extraordinary' dimension is evident in their stylised and glamorous performances in the photo shoots and on the magazine covers.

II) Endorsement adverts with film stars

In celebrity culture, successful celebrities manage to create a celebrity brand inspired by the managed fame of classic Hollywood stardom. "The celebrity brand refers to the images, symbols and associations built around a celebrity – by strengthening the brand the celebrity builds a fan base. When it is successful, it translates into high impact factors that, in turn attract advertisers. It is estimated that 20 percent of American advertisements now feature celebrities" (Rojek 2013). In *Hollywood Stardom*, McDonald (2013: 3), however, stresses that "Stars are used to sell films through their appearance in marketing media and they are a part of what determines how well a film performs at the box-office." McDonald argues that it makes sense to understand the Hollywood star as a brand: First, there is the 'star as a brand' within the film industry, promoting the film in which he or she stars and sustaining the preferred image. Second,

there are the so-called 'commercial extensions', that is, endorsement deals for products other than films (McDonald 2013: 59). When celebrities endorse products, the most transferable elements are, according to Rojek, athletic competence, intellectual capacity, emotional intelligence, and physical appearance, all of which depend, however, on a certain degree of compatibility between the brand and the celebrity (Rojek 2013). Corporations would not persist with celebrity endorsement if they lacked proof that it enhances brand recognition: Celebrity endorsement is designed to transfer the star's commodified magnetism to the product (Rojek 2013: 93-94). From a consumer research perspective, Grant McCracken makes a distinction in 'Who is the Celebrity Endorser? Cultural Foundations of the Endorsement Process' (McCracken 1989: 310) between four typical modes by which endorsement is articulated in adverts: the explicit mode ("I endorse this this product"), the implicit mode ("I use this product"), the imperative mode ("You should use this product"), and the co-present mode (i.e., in which the celebrity merely appears with the product). For high-end products such as designer fragrances, cosmetics, and luxury cars, the typical strategy is the co-present mode or the implicit mode as in the Cumberbatch Jaguar 'Alive' video commercial (2012),¹ in which Cumberbatch narrates while driving a Jaguar around London: "The minute you get into the car, you realise that everything is tailored for an extraordinary driving experience." The co-present mode is far more common in contemporary media culture, such as Lupita Nyong'o's Lancôme and Miu Miu print adverts.² "The effectiveness of the endorser depends, in part, upon the meanings he or she brings to the endorsement process" (McCracken 1989: 313). McCracken distinguishes between demographic categories class, gender, and age on the one hand and personality or lifestyle types on the other (McCracken: 313). In Nyong'o's case, her Lancôme advert demonstrates that she, an Oscar winner and an aspiring poster girl for young black women in popular media, has been successful. For the firm, it also potentially establishes Lancôme as having an eye for beauty that is not determined by race. The demographic is thus widely defined because it not only appeals to young black women but also tells a positive story of an open-minded conglomerate, which may attract other demographics. In Cumberbatch's Jaguar commercial, his voice-over narration directly plays into his upper-middle class upbringing and his

status as a serious actor. In that sense, his roles as highly intelligent characters alongside his posh image fit well into the potential young male demographic for luxury cars.

III) The red carpet at the Academy Awards: The collapse of the star as brand

The live Oscars red carpet is a prestigious event and has been ever since it was first held in 1929. The purpose of the event was to bestow respectability and glamour upon the Hollywood film industry in order to make it a cultural factor to be reckoned with. In recent years, the Oscars live transmission has acquired a global reach, and the red carpet pre-show, in which the stars arrive at the ceremony, has become a show in itself (Haastrup 2008). The Academy Awards is a live media event, a ritual with great authority in the industry (McDonald 2013), and an event with an audience of millions around the world. As a type of media event, it is a combination of a 'competition' type of event because there is only one winner in each category and a 'crowning' type of event because it is an event in which Hollywood showcases some of its most prominent stars (Dayan & Katz 1992). The red carpet appearance is well rehearsed and prepared in advance, yet the nomination or invitation to present at the ceremony cannot be planned. Still, when the stars are present, their performance in the pre-show is meticulously choreographed. The live Oscars red carpet is a good example of the collapse between 'the star as brand' and the star as engaging in 'commercial extensions', as defined above by MacDonald (2013) because the Hollywood star wearing a designer outfit on the red carpet is doing both simultaneously. In recent years, the fashion house Dior has employed Oscar-winning actresses like Natalie Portman, Marion Cotillard, and Jennifer Lawrence, with these actresses wearing a dress from that particular designer the following year when the previous year's winners are invited back to present awards. The stars thus benefit from exposure on the red carpet while simultaneously advertising cosmetics, bags, and perfumes in other media. The star is a brand endorsing a film and himself/herself as an actor as well as a brand endorsing a particular fashion house in a globally broadcast live media event.

At the Oscars in 2014, Lupita Nyong'o was wearing Prada (the firm that also makes the Miu Miu clothes line that she has endorsed).

She told the press in interviews from the red carpet that she had chosen the colour (Nairobi blue) herself, allowing Nyong'o to accentuate that this high-fashion dress is in fact connected to her home country.³ Benedict Cumberbatch was also impeccably dressed in a Savile Row tuxedo by Spencer Hart, though he was not wearing a bowtie like most of the other men present. Cumberbatch presented himself as a red-carpet prankster when he photo bombed the rock band U2, an image that ensured he was not only perceived as a 'stiff upper lip' but also as someone who can make a joke.⁴ In other words, the live Oscars red carpet is not only an example of the collapse of the star as brand and the stars' 'commercial extension' but also works as a platform for managing the star's image: For relatively young stars such as Nyong'o and Cumberbatch, this respectively involved emphasising determined integrity and self-deprecating humour. What sets the red carpet appearance apart from the other celebrity genres is that it is broadcast live. Intimacy at a distance is established through the interviews with the stars, yet extraordinariness is simultaneously accentuated because, when you appear on the red carpet as an Oscar nominee (or presenter), you are recognised as a star.

Concluding remarks

This brief analysis of how Hollywood stars are presented in three different celebrity genres has shown that they all deploy the key concepts of celebrity culture theory such as ordinary/extraordinary, intimacy at a distance, and the star as a resource and that they do so in different ways. The fashion magazine interview accentuates the star as a resource as well as extraordinary, with the photo shoot and the cover showing the star dressed in fashionable clothes and providing lifestyle and self-improvement advice in the interview. In contrast, endorsement advertisements make the star's extraordinary quality their key element whereas live red carpet broadcasts stress extraordinariness as well as 'intimacy at a distance' due to their simultaneous live experience.

The advantage of analysing mainstream media genres within film culture and combining theoretical concepts on celebrity culture with journalism genre analysis, film industry studies, and endorsement analysis is that it provides detailed insight into how stardom is articulated on the level of specific media texts. Digital media culture

and social media in particular also make it possible for Hollywood stars to independently accentuate certain aspects of their star images. Examples include Nyong'o's management of her Instagram account to keep fans updated about her accomplishments in the fashion business and new endorsement deals as well as Cumberbatch's participation in the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge on YouTube, showing him getting a bucket of ice-cold water poured over him for a charity collecting funds for a particular disease. For contemporary Hollywood stars (and celebrities in general), analysis of the various celebrity genres in mainstream media is central to understanding how Hollywood stars are on the one hand part of a strictly managed fame and on the other hand are able to manage certain parts of their careers by creating their own 'cultural biographies' (Rojek 2013). In this way, Hollywood stars combine the mainstream celebrity genres analysed here with their own – at least apparently more personal or self-made – presence in social media. New Hollywood stars such as Nyong'o and Cumberbatch often take matters into their own hands and use social media on their own terms (or so it seems). Nevertheless, mainstream celebrity genres offer many different options for managing Hollywood fame in particular ways as this study aimed to demonstrate. However, in terms of genre, both Cumberbatch and Nyong'o – as new Hollywood stars – also address the audience more directly through the social media genres of Instagram and YouTube. This challenges the authority of typical mainstream celebrity genres and conceptions of how Hollywood icons could or should be represented in celebrity culture.

Notes:

- 1 "Alive" Jaguar commercial (2012) : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x5k-CfXIPcfw>
- 2 Lancome advert (2014): <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/lifestyle/2014/06/26/lupita-nyong'o-is-lancomes-first-ever-black-ambassador/>
Miu Miu advert (2014): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gpGxYsjkoxM>
- 3 Lupita Nyong'o at the Academy Awards 2014: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fX3_BAA7pl8
- 4 Benedict Cumberbatch Academy Awards 2014 photobomb: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FPyFzLeRYpg>

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Interviews

Lupita Nyong'o Vogue interview:

<http://www.vogue.com/magazine/article/lupita-nyong-o-first-vogue-cover/#1>

Benedict Cumberbatch GQ interview:

<http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2013-12/02/benedict-cumberbatch-gq-cover-sherlock>

