

He's Still Here

Joaquin Phoenix as Transgressive Hollywood Star

Penny Spirou

completed her PhD in the area of contemporary musical biopics at Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia). Since, she has pursued research interests in film, celebrity/star studies and representations of auto/biography. Penny Spirou is currently Book Reviews Editor for IASPM@Journal, teaches media studies at UNSW, and is Graduate Education Officer at The University of Notre Dame Australia.

Abstract

On 11 February 2009, Joaquin Phoenix announced that he would be retiring from acting to pursue his ambition of becoming a hip hop musician. One year later, 'documentary' feature film, *I'm Still Here* was theatrically released; chronicling the life of Phoenix that followed the announcement of his retirement. A week into its release in the US, director Casey Affleck confessed to *The New York Times* (Cieply 2010) that the film was in fact a mockumentary. *I'm Still Here* is Affleck's (and Phoenix's) statement film, inviting the audience to reflect on their own contribution to celebrity culture. The film draws attention to both the star and the fan and their joint contribution in developing the myth of the Hollywood star. However, primarily, it shows Phoenix's transition from star to celebrity, as argued in this paper. This case is framed by the scholarly study of stars, iconology and celebrity, and argues that the series of media events created by Phoenix and Affleck provide a commentary on the contemporary notion of Hollywood stardom.

Keywords Joaquin Phoenix, Hollywood, transgressive, star, celebrity

Introduction

The last performance Phoenix gave before his transformation to his new identity, 'J.P.' was in the romantic drama film *Two Lovers* (2008). The film received mostly positive reviews,¹ however during the film's promotion, Phoenix appeared as his new 'character' in interviews and press releases.² It was at this point that he transitioned from being a star to a celebrity. Richard Dyer states that during the classical Hollywood period "stars were gods, heroes, models... embodiments of ideal ways of behaving" to, more recently, becoming "embodiments of typical ways of behaving" (1986, 24). Stars have some form of talent and behave in a way that is deemed acceptable. In this paper I argue that Phoenix retains his star persona and iconology, even after his (temporary) physical transformation in *I'm Still Here*, where he momentarily became a 'celebrity'. The celebrity does not need to behave typically, or even appropriately and often behaves in a generally unacceptable way. As Cashmore suggests, "a peculiarity of celebrity culture is the shift of emphasis from achievement-based fame to media-driven renown" (2006, 7). As opposed to a star that has a talent and/or exceptional abilities, the celebrity merely has a media presence. David Giles further implies that, "The ultimate modern celebrity is the member of the public who becomes famous solely through media involvement" (2000, 5). The following will demonstrate that this is what Phoenix became when he transformed into 'J.P.', the character he became, both on and off screen for *I'm Still Here*.

The following article addresses the differences between celebrity, stardom and iconology. Phoenix has drawn definitional lines between 'star' and 'celebrity' with controversy surrounding *I'm Still Here* and definitions of 'art' and 'entertainment' with media coverage surrounding his return to acting in *The Master*, illustrated in Figure 1.

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|--|---|-----------|
| Celebrity (<i>I'm Still Here</i>) | → | Temporary |
| Focus on entertainment e.g. Phoenix's comment on celebrity culture | | |
| Star (<i>The Master</i>) | → | Enduring |
| Focus on art e.g. Phoenix panning the Oscars | | |

Figure 1: The Star v. The Celebrity

Figure 1 asserts a definitional difference between the terms 'celebrity' and 'star' which are often used interchangeably in academic studies. Celebrity is linked to entertainment; its main function. Therefore, the celebrity is a temporary fixture - it does not linger in the public conscious for any extended period, much like the contestants of reality TV programs (for further definition of celebrity see Kurzman et. al. 2007 and for a study of celebrity and reality television see Bell 2009). The star has a distinct talent in any field and due to this their persona lingers even long after their death. Examples include Michael Jackson and John Lennon (for further study on stardom see Richard Dyer's seminal study on *Stars*, 1979 and Gledhill 1991).

Developing a new approach to iconology, Hans Belting addresses the temporality and spatiality of the image (noted in Figure 1) which will be applied, in this case, to the star image of Joaquin Phoenix. He reveals that:

Images traditionally live from the body's absence, which is either temporary (that is, spatial) or, in the case of death, final. This absence does not mean that images revoke absent bodies and make them return. Rather, they replace the body's absence with a different kind of presence. Iconic presence still maintains a body's absence and turns it into what must be called visible absence (Belting 2005, 312).

In the instance of Phoenix as film actor, the work he produces is considered art and lingers in the public conscious (film as art is discussed by Bordwell and Thompson, 2009). The notion of celebrity (Figure 1) is temporary and is a key aspect of Phoenix's iconology when shifting (momentarily) to J.P. To further define the term, Marshall suggests that 'celebrity' developed a new definition in contemporary society. He deduces that, "It has become a term that announces a vulgar sense of notoriety" (1997, 5). The vulgar sense of notoriety is what Phoenix intentionally positions himself in. Through the events leading up to *I'm Still Here*, he reinforces the current state of celebrity. Jill Nelmes' definition of the star is that "The star is seen... as an object of desire and is studied in terms of the ways in which spectators identify with, find meaning in, and gain a certain fulfilment from, his or her image" (2003, 171). The

star is an individual who is admired often for a skill or talent they possess. In the case of Joaquin Phoenix it is his acting abilities, therefore his convincing performance in *The Master*, and even previous to the *I'm Still Here* events, including his role in *Gladiator* and *Walk the Line*, allowed for his return to this high standing (from celebrity back to star status).

Background

Before his foray into 'celebrity', Phoenix entered the Hollywood landscape and through selected roles, became what is deemed here as a star. In 2000 Phoenix was recognised for his role as Commodus in *Gladiator*³ and Johnny Cash in *Walk the Line*.⁴ Media/audience perception at this time was that he was a serious actor and he had received acclaim from both critics and audiences (Metacritic 2014). Directors and co-stars he had worked with over the years stated that Phoenix was a method actor and often remained in character off screen, until the film had completely finished shooting including Tony Scott, executive producer of *Clay Pigeons* (Clarke 2002) and Paul Thomas Anderson, director of *The Master* (Lim 2012). Phoenix's acting style is telling of the character he embodied for *I'm Still Here* and his convincing performance.

The four year span of Joaquin Phoenix's career altered his public persona. In 2008 Phoenix announced that he had made the decision to change his careers from an actor to a hip-hop musician. Here his physical appearance, mannerisms, and personality had completely shifted. Phoenix emerged dirty and dishevelled, with an over-grown beard, hair grown out to the point that it resembled dreadlocks and an unkempt dress sense (see Figure 2). In terms of his mannerisms, he often chewed gum, grumbled and seemed distanced and unfocused. He was initially considered by fans as a strong, serious actor (who main-

tained his physical appearance), however he slowly deteriorated and many feared for his mental stability, chronicled in numerous media/news articles.⁵



Figure 2: Joaquin Phoenix in *I'M STILL HERE*, a Magnolia Pictures release. Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures.

In 2010, *I'm Still Here* was released and marketed as a documentary following Phoenix's transition between the two careers, however shortly after, film director Casey Affleck admitted that it was all an act. It was confirmed that Phoenix did not intend to retire from acting. The series of events was somewhat of a stunt to reinforce the negative aspects of celebrity culture. In 2012 Phoenix returned to Hollywood and starred in *The Master*. His performance was so well received that he was tipped for an Oscar nomination at the 85th awards show. In addition, *Her* (2014), featuring Phoenix in the lead role, received a Best Picture nomination at the 86th Oscars. Phoenix's strong return to 'serious' film acting after the events that led to *I'm Still Here* establishes Phoenix as a transgressive icon of American filmmaking who, even after his celebrity incursion, retains the label of Hollywood star.

Joaquin Phoenix as Celebrity

On 27 October 2008, Phoenix told Jerry Penacoli of *Extra* that he would be retiring from acting (Extra 2010). However, the appearance that provided the most media attention was on the 11 February 2009, where Phoenix appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman*. An unaware Letterman interviewed Phoenix and tried to promote his new film, *Two Lovers*. Phoenix mumbled through most of the interview, chewing gum which he eventually placed under Letterman's desk. Letterman finally concluded the interview by saying "Joaquin, I'm sorry you couldn't be here tonight."⁶ The appearance was discussed by fans and audiences online, commented on by journalists online and on television news. There were also many people who ridiculed him online which leaked through Hollywood when Ben Stiller presented an award at the Oscars dressed like Phoenix, telling Natalie Portman that he "didn't want to be the funny guy anymore" (as noted in Ebert 2010), which was actually planned after the Letterman appearance and before Stiller participated in the filming of *I'm Still Here*. However, unlike stars that are considered permanent fixtures, the celebrity is temporary and does not linger in the media for too long. Soon after the media frenzy sparked by Phoenix's Letterman interview, he and his story were soon completely forgotten.

It was not until 18 months after his appearance on Letterman that *I'm Still Here* was theatrically released on 10 September 2010 in the US, UK and Australia. The official synopsis is as follows:

The directorial debut of Oscar-nominated actor Casey Affleck, *I'm Still Here* is a striking portrayal of a tumultuous year in the life of internationally acclaimed actor Joaquin Phoenix. With remarkable access, *I'm Still Here* follows the Oscar-nominee as he announces his retirement from a successful film career in the fall of 2008 and sets off to reinvent himself as a hip hop musician... the film is a portrait of an artist at a crossroads... it deftly explores notions of courage and creative reinvention, as well as the ramifications of a life spent in the public eye (Magnolia Pictures 2013).

A couple of weeks into the release of *I'm Still Here*, Affleck told the *New York Times* that the series of events were staged and that Phoenix never intended to retire from acting. What Affleck (and Phoenix) intended to do was to comment on celebrity culture. The two agreed that the only way audiences could engage with the film was to believe that the Joaquin Phoenix (or J.P.) in *I'm Still Here* was real, therefore claiming "it's not a hoax, it's a performance" (in Child 2010). Joaquin Phoenix reappeared on the David Letterman show on 22 September 2010 to explain his behaviour on his last appearance, a year and a half prior. In the interview, he said, "We [with Casey Affleck] wanted a film that explored celebrity and explored the relationship between the media and the consumers and the celebrities themselves"⁷ Indeed key scenes in the film reflected the actual public reaction to Phoenix's celebrity shift. There is a scene where J.P. is reading comments of his performance online, in the darkness of his hotel room, in nothing more than his underwear, and is noticeably upset by it. He takes his aggression out on his friends and colleagues by verbally and physically abusing them. Here through his role he is attempting to demonstrate the negative impact of celebrity culture with his own image and iconology at stake.

Affleck's intention throughout the project was to draw attention to how destructive audiences/fans are online (with blogs, twitters, comments) and in other public places, verbally abusing and defam-

ing celebrities/stars. Affleck intended to comment on celebrity culture, demonstrating that the consumer is, “fixated on celebrities, we build myths around them” (in Anderson 2010). He also reportedly told *The Times* that he wanted to show, “the disintegration of celebrity, without the clutter of preconceived notions” (in Sieczkowski 2012). His film was intentionally meant to evoke a reaction from the audience - a self-awareness of their role in celebrity culture.

Iconology and Stardom

Joaquin Phoenix in *The Master*

Reinforcing Phoenix’s star status, he eventually came back from his celebrity experiment and become a Hollywood star again less than two years later. This is due to, what Jane Davison theorises as, an evocation of the “repressed memory” (2009, 888). Audiences recall Phoenix’s star iconicity (his role in *Gladiator*, *Walk the Line*, and others addressed above), and his public identity returns to that of the star. Further, in an interview with Joaquin Phoenix about *The Master* on 1 November 2012, *Independent* journalist, Kaleem Aftab reports that Phoenix was uncomfortable in the interview and that “I’m Still Here was a one-finger salute to the media obsession with celebrity”. In the interview, there is a clear distinction made between ‘summer blockbusters’ and films like *The Master*. What I deem the difference between ‘entertainment’ and ‘art’ (Figure 1). Phoenix states that he is not interested in making those blockbuster films but has no problem with their existence.

Joaquin Phoenix was nominated for Best Actor at the Academy Awards for his role as Freddie Quell in *The Master*.⁸ Phoenix was present at the awards ceremony, looking distinctly similar to his previous character, J.P. He further confirms, in relation to speculation that these negative comments might have cost him the Oscar nomination:

But I know that first of all, I wouldn’t have the career that I have if it weren’t for the Oscars. But in some ways it’s the antithesis of what you want to be as an actor. You’re always trying to free yourself of the artifice, which is really difficult (Maddox 2012).

In this instance, Phoenix addresses celebrity culture and the pitfalls of being an actor in Hollywood. Through his craft as an actor he is able to exert power over his own iconology in a way that he is able to shape it, moving from star to celebrity, and then returning to stardom. However, as he suggests above, he is bounded by the limitations of the Hollywood industry in which he is vested in.

Conclusion

Joaquin Phoenix is a transgressive Hollywood star who uses his acting abilities to transform from star to celebrity and is able to make his way back to stardom. Through the experimental documentary (now referred to as a mockumentary), *I'm Still Here*, Phoenix (and Affleck) attempted to demonstrate the impact of audience engagement on celebrity culture. By convincing the audiences and media that Phoenix had retired from acting, *I'm Still Here* was able to show viewers the impact of celebrity on the individual at stake, and therefore allow the audience to self-reflectively confront their stance on the culture of celebrity. Further, Phoenix was able to manipulate his iconological presence, by consciously shifting from star to celebrity, potentially putting his career at stake. The result, as is evident in *The Master*, is that Phoenix has a distinct iconic presence that is enduring in its temporality.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 As examples of positive reviews, *Two Lovers* received an 82% fresh rating on Rotten Tomatoes (http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/two_lovers/, accessed July 25, 2014) and 7.1 out of 10 on IMDb (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1103275/>, accessed July 25, 2014).
- 2 *Two Lovers* and *I'm Still Here* were released by Magnolia Pictures.
- 3 Phoenix was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in the role of Commodus in *Gladiator*.

- 4 Phoenix was nominated for Best Actor in *Walk the Line* as well as receiving numerous awards including a Golden Globe for his performance as Johnny Cash.
- 5 An article on CNN compares Phoenix's spiral into mental instability to Charlie Sheen's breakdown: <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/celebrity.news.gossip/03/04/team.sheen.joaquin.phoenix/index.html>, accessed February 19, 2013.
- 6 The interview can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZTmw26RYJU>, accessed February 11, 2013.
- 7 The interview can be viewed here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zAaxUi8_4_I, accessed February 11, 2013.
- 8 Daniel Day Lewis won the award for his portrayal of Abraham Lincoln in *Lincoln*. For a full report of all nominees and winners at the 2013 and 2014 Academy Awards, visit: <http://oscar.go.com/nominees> (accessed March 5, 2013).