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Desecrating celebrity

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Defile me

When we decided on the theme of *Desecrating Celebrity* for the Fourth Celebrity Studies International Conference at Sapienza University in Rome, 2018, none of the most powerful examples of contemporary desecration had yet occurred. We were still to see the allegations of rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse laid by over 80 women against Hollywood film producer, Harvey Weinstein. This, in turn, gave rise to the #metoo movement and the flood of male stars and celebrities who were accused of using their positions of power for their own ends, including Kevin Spacey. We were still to see: Bill Cosby's final metamorphosis from the beloved, cuddly patriarch of *The Cosby Show*, into an inveterate predator; the tax evasion scandal that engulfed Cristiano Ronaldo, and the subsequent rape allegations levelled against him; the ferocious divorce between cult and mainstream idol Johnny Deep and Amber Heard, including allegations of spousal abuse; the demise of Brangelina's marriage and the battle over alimony and who would be custodians over their children; and the airing of the HBO documentary *Leaving Neverland* which accuses Michael Jackson of paedophilia. There are numerous other examples, a veritable polluted sea of falls from grace and the perversion of star and celebrity images: it was if desecration was now the dominant, the central determinant of celebrity culture. Of course, many of the examples listed here are tied to sexual power and the ideologies that shape them.

Even if such determination can be questioned – stars and celebrities continue to provide cohering social myths to bind with – the issues of degradation, desecration and decelebrification are an integral part of the complex phenomenon of celebrity. Unsurprisingly the switch between steps related to consecration and degradation in celebrity life is a constant: the rise and fall narrative, a central component of star and fan identification streams, and media marketing. For some stars, such as Fatty Arbuckle and Paul Reubens¹, the desecrating moment marked the end of their career and the long-lasting revocation from the dominant culture's collective memory. That said, even when a star or celebrity falls from grace their decline becomes a media story in itself, and for some fans the trade and traffic in their perverse memorabilia produces new modes of affective engagement (Schickel 2000).

Nonetheless, the flows of consecration and desecration are marked by media fields and technologies and the conceptualisation of 'near' and far', whether it be the big screen, and the slow time of print and analogue technologies, or the liquid quick time of the digital age. The question of proximity and intimacy is often argued to increase with such

formations as Reality TV, or the social media, opening up new 'authentic' frames with which to bind with figures of fame. But it is also enabling new discourses of trolling to take root and branch. For example, in Elizabeth Podniek's analysis of the perezhilton.com website, they find trolling to be: 'graphic, aural, oral, auto/biographical, collaborative, and collective, it is a postmodern celebration of and desecration of the life and times of fame today' (2009, p. 69).

The shift from a predominantly top-down, broadcast-driven media logic to one involving a dynamic content circulation paradigm, has challenged the way that celebrity culture is symbolically and materially produced, circulated and consumed. In these new circulation processes the celebrities 'digital life' is, in fact, produced from the contamination between top-down and bottom-up forces, and official and unofficial media streams. This friction results in the increasing visibility of celebrities as they move between media 'layers' and as 'control' over what and how they represent shift between producers and consumers, mediators and fans. Consecration and desecration flow from such newly open or porous digital formations, as the examples above suggest. The #MeTooMovement enabled female stars and celebrities to use Twitter to circumnavigate official discourses, bringing to light their own desecration as they rightfully desecrated those figures who had abused them.

One might argue that this increases the 'intensity' with which stars and celebrities are engaged with and in the way stars and celebrities 'speak' to culture (Jerslev 2016). This increasingly active and participatory role of the audience, then, also resonates in the celebrity-building process, as well as in the parallel and complementary degradation process. In comparison to the 'mediated quasi-interaction' described by Thompson (1995), in the case of electronic media, in the new digital media system, the affective participation of audiences in production, distribution and consumption of the celebrities becomes conclusive. Moreover, these processes succeed at an absolutely unpredictable speed compared to the traditional mass media system. For example, American actress Alyssa Milano² began using the phrase 'Me Too' on Twitter in 2017. Milano encouraged victims of sexual harassment to tweet about it and 'give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem'. Within 1 year, the #MeToo hashtag had been used over 19 million times (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/11/how-social-media-users-have-discussed-sexual-harassment-since-metoo-went-viral/ft_18-10-11_metooanniversary_hashtag-used-19m_times/)

In this radically transformed scenario, digital media seem to do be able to two different things: it can give rise to instantaneous celebrities, consecrated without formal ordination; and, due to the possible shortening of the chronological interval between celebrification and desecration, it can quicken the processes of degradation. But not only this, this temporal instantaneity can quickly turn a fallen star or celebrity into a holy figure again, since the means of real-time reconsecrations are easily afforded. There is an amnesia that leaks into the flows of celebrity culture. In fact, within the new media ecosystem, the fallen celebrity may potentially reach an even higher level of elevation in the public sphere. We may consider in this sense the media storytelling of Asia Argento, the Italian actress who was among the first actresses to speak out about powerful producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual assaults. Within a few months, she was the victim of a terrifying online ritual of degradation managed by Italian newspapers, politicians and audiences because of her role of victim and heroine; then she was celebrated for her renewed visibility and success

on TV (she was hired by X-Factor); finally, when she was accused of sexual assault by Jimmy Bennet, she was condemned and again celebrated by the media as both oppressor and penitent victim.

Here the perceived truthfulness and authenticity of the celebrity confessional is seen to produce this constant flow of celebrity consecration and desecration. Celebrities can use the digital media as a set of stages to emotionalise themselves and to puncture the fakery of so-called parasocial interaction. Similarly, fans and consumers can mine these performances, stage their own performances, opening up celebrity culture to congregations which defile and sanctify the famous.

This re-staging of where, how and when celebrity culture is produced, may have two consequences. First, the process of cultural and collective, psychic and individual 'filtering' processes may be severely lessened and undermined. In the 'wild west' of the digital media and the social media in particular, there is the space for producers and consumers/fans to totally rewrite the rules of desecration, and more generally, the moral rules of interaction. This may lead to a downward spiral of decline: where contemporary online degradation 'ceremonies' result in a ferocious backlash, which in turn produce a viler set of engagements and so on, each spiral more contaminated than the last. When these stages create the hate speech that target race, gender and sexuality, real injury is imparted (Lumsden and Morgan 2012).

Second, the democracy it affords and the issues that it can deal with, open up the world to new forms of creative agency and political activism, of which the #MeToo movement is a powerful example. Here desecration is in the service of emancipatory politics. There is, of course, the folds and flows of pleasure: the unruly nature of desecration which allows those who play in that space a sense that there is life beyond the neoliberal marketplace.

An unholy special edition

Standing between consecration and desecration, this special issue is dedicated to the examination of the ongoing transformation of the social role and significance of celebrities in an age where the divide between good and evil has collapsed. As we demonstrate in this Introduction, the thematic issue of desecration, and more generally of celebrity consecration, is far from being exhaustively investigated. This special issue, then, does not and cannot offer a definitive overview of the area but rather seeks to open doorways and to raise important questions about the morality and immorality of fame.

Nonetheless, the articles selected have been drawn from the very best work presented at the 2018 conference. They take us from the holy chapels of religion to the 'nasty' politics of the age of Trump; from the starry screens of Hollywood cinema to the wasted vestiges of television personalities; and from the moralising speech of the social media to the sacrilege of David Bowie. Celebrity culture will never be this defiled again.

Feminism, religiosity and celebrity culture represent an ideal *fil rouge* in the opening essays by Misha Kavka and Lucy Bolton, both Keynote speakers at the conference. In *Taking Down the Sacred: Fuck-me vs. Fuck-you Celebrity*, Misha tracks and traces the power geometries found in celebrity culture's own appetite for profanities. Making a powerful distinction between fuck-me and fuck-you celebrity, with the former being seen to abide by standards of feminine beauty, and the latter as openly addressing the unequal forces of

sex and power, the article sees a shift between the two. Drawing on post-Weinstein era examples, such as Caitlyn Jenner, Tess Holliday and Rose McGowan, the article suggests that the celebrity system, which has heavily favoured the fuck-me trope, is now beginning to enunciate an active 'fuck you' political sensibility.

In Lucy's article, *Beautiful Penitent Whore: the Desecrated Celebrity of Mary Magdalene*, she explores the way that Mary Magdalene as both celebrity and film star embodied the classic dichotomy of virgin and whore found in Western Judeo-Christian culture. Writing from an interdisciplinary perspective, and drawing upon theology, church and art history, feminist film and media studies, celebrity and popular culture, Lucy examines a number of seminal 'religious' films to 'unravel' the saintly and unsaintly representations found of Mary. In so-doing, the article shows us the benefit of interdisciplinary analysis, and the forms through which gendered religious representations flourish.

In Michael Williams's essay, *A Venus in Marble and Bakelite: Ava Gardner and One Touch of Venus*, 'divinisation' is explored through the promotion and reception of *One Touch of Venus* (1949), which drew up and extended Ava Gardner's then rising star profile. Michael discusses how Universal-International's marketing campaign drew upon patriarchal notions of female beauty where initiatives such as the Bakelite figurine of Gardner distributed to exhibitors, and beauty contest tie-ins where fans could measure themselves up against star and sculpture alike, reproduced a form of gendered and desecrating commodification that ultimately served repressive ends.

In *White Trash Celebrity in the Age of Eugenics: Desecrating Clara Bow*, Gaylyn Studlar also explores the gendered dimension of film star desecration but closely ties it to white trash sensibilities. Gaylyn suggests that Bow's symbolic and commodity value was synonymous with the erotic provocations of the stereotyped flapper, but her celebrity transgressed Hollywood's conventional discourses of white idealisation, instead infecting it with lower-class licentiousness. The article goes on to powerfully conclude that such representations lay the ideological groundwork for the class shaming that is directed at 'chav' female celebrities associated with British reality television today.

The perverse nature of the sex scandal is taken up in Caroline Bainbridge's analysis of Jimmy Savile and his status as a somehow 'untouchable' celebrity. In *Who Will Fix it for Us? Toxic Celebrity and the Therapeutic Dynamics of Media Culture*, Caroline explores the media processes and practices that helped both shape and respond to the desecration of Savile's celebrity, persuasively arguing that there is a therapeutic quality to the production and consumption of such scandalous events. The article goes on to argue that re-mediations of celebrity scandals provide important outlets for unconscious emotional experience, in turn creating an important psychological space for resisting dominant narratives that contrive to shape celebrity as somehow 'untouchable'.

Sex and power are also the keywords in two recent cases of decelebrification – Bill Cosby and Kevin Spacey – discussed by Mette Mortensen and Nete Nørgaard Kristensen in their article, *De-celebrification: Beyond the Scandalous*. Mette and Nete propose a new term, de-celebrification, to designate a state in which celebrities lose their legitimacy and no longer possess the formal and symbolic power formerly attached to their celebrity status. Drawing upon empirical data to investigate the way audiences respond and contribute to fallen celebrities, the article shows how the agency can work in the contemporary digital age.

Sreya Mitra takes up the challenge of exploring the complex role that the social media has in desecrating the female star or celebrity through such acts as chastisement, ridicule and trolling. In *Trolled, Body-Shamed and Slut-Shamed: The Desecration of the Contemporary Bollywood Female Star on Social Media*, Sreya examines the way Bollywood female stars are often body-shamed and trolled on social media platforms such as Twitter. Drawing upon Priyanka Chopra as a case study, the article explores the way they attempted to navigate their role as a transmedia and transnational celebrity, against the public humiliation they faced online for not embodying traditional Indian 'feminine' qualities.

In his essay, *Desecration and the Politics of 'Image Pollution': Ambedkar Statues and the 'Sculptural Encounter in India'*, Pramod Nayar returns to the theme of sculptural desecration explored in Michael Williams' article. Pramod examines the desecration of public statues of B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), who drafted the constitution of India, suggesting that desecration speaks to complex ideas and tensions around nationhood and the national imaginary, and the binary caste and class system that he worked against. To desecrate or profane the Ambedkar statue is to question the pure/impure distinction that the figure represents.

The desecration of politics and public values is the focus of the article by Anita Biressi who critically examines Donald Trump's political persona. In *President Trump: Celebrity-in-chief and the Desecration of Political Authority*, Anita suggests that Donald Trump's perverse power lies in his self-ordained role as a celebrity-in-chief who desecrates politics, political authority and the political scene. This political sacrilege has consequences for political authority and the discourses that operate within the political arena since it lowers and stains the issues that politics explores.

Now moving to the journal's *forum section*, music celebrities are the very protagonists who are seen and heard to desecrate the arenas of fame.

In Ian Dixon's essay, *Your Face is a Mess: Desecrating David Bowie's Face-as-Commodity in 'Diamond Dogs'*, the protagonist is the face of David Bowie, that is – like for many celebrities – the access point for fans to the star personality. In the *Diamond Dogs* album, Bowie plays with his face presenting himself as a half-man, half-dog freak, a cocaine addict and performer who is sexually promiscuous and non-heteronormative. As Ian suggests, Bowie's fascination with facial desecration may result in the annihilation of his own celebrity, while it challenges the role of iconic faces of singers as new saints, martyrs and religious figures.

The face, then, is considered by fans as an important tool to use in order to reach the real meaning of a celebrity and at the same time as a strategy managed by celebrities themselves to play with audiences in their symbolic appropriation. Within a celebrity landscape so drastically changed by social media, this kind of interaction among fans and celebrities needs to be further explored: in the essay *From Awkward Teen Girl to Aryan Goddess Meme: Taylor Swift and the Hijacking of Star Texts*, Annelot Prins reflects on the appropriations of Taylor Swift's persona as a symbol of white supremacy. According to the author, this might be interpreted both as one-sided fan practices from an undesired audience and as a potential hook, promised to her fans by her music. The appropriation of Swift, as analysed by Annelot, shows that the impact of social media on star texts can hardly be underestimated, and a polysemic star text that declines to explicitly claim political position may even provide opportunities for hijacking by audiences.

The complex and contradictory relationship among fans and celebrities is also investigated in the article, *Jaak Joala – ‘Kremlin nightingale’ or Estonian Celebrity?* In an attempt to explain the dynamic of Estonian singer Estrada Joala’s fame, Heli Reiman reflects on the schizophrenic balance between the star’s diverse self-presentations and the multiple audiences expectations and needs within different political and historical contexts. Joala’s nationalist role in Estonian popular music history has been recently recognised and re-established through numerous commemorative acts produced for the narrative-building project of the Estonian cultural past. However, it was not always so: as a matter of fact, Joala’s artistic image as a romantic, charismatic, talented, western-like singer, addressed the expectations of Soviet audiences, which was simultaneously rejected by Estonian audiences not surprisingly because of a lack of nationalism.

As these cases study make evident, the celebrity is clearly a matter of narratives. The role of media and social media storytelling is relevant also in the case of the celebrity trainwreck. In her article, *Trainwreck Femininity and Whitney: Monstrous Feminine Redux*, Susan Hopkins reflects on how the celebrity trainwreck invites fans into a modern ‘passion play’ of the sacred and profane, through patriarchal narratives that negate the agency of the female star. As Hopkins reports, Whitney Houston and Amy Winehouse have been dehumanised and punished by mainstream and new media, represented as female pop stars known more for their drug use, troubled relationships, erratic or self-harming behaviour and emotional instability, than for being powerful and creative models of subversion.

Conclusion

In desecrating celebrity – in ‘shitting on its shibboleths’ as Sean put it when opening the conference – we have sought to do two things. First, to undermine, question and resist dominant and perceived ways of understanding celebrity culture. Second, to shine an unholy light on the way that desecration and consecration operate in the dark days of the contemporary political age. As we finish writing this Introduction, the news reminds us that the ugly, gendered signifiers of desecration is everywhere – it is in the reported endorsement by President Bolsonaro of Brazil, of a post on Facebook insulting the French first lady, Brigitte Macron; and it is in Melania Trump’s smouldering exchange with Canada’s prime minister, Justin Trudeau (August 2019). The former works off ageist and sexist stereotypes and the latter softens and romanticises the fakery that each represent. But, finally, the news or rather the ‘new’ news, or the informational flow which circulates in dynamic streams on the social media, also show us that resistant desecration is everywhere, shaped by a political agency and criticality that seeks to tear down the normative walls. As Prince Andrew continues to maintain his innocence with respect to his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, prostitution and under-aged sex, the media trolls rise up, challenging his official narrative, offering a counter to this ascribed celebrity caught in a clear abuse of power. It our job to defaecate on and to desecrate celebrity culture.

Notes

1. It should be noted that Reubens has continued to work, to take on film and television roles. However, these ‘cameo’ roles largely support the argument that he is carnivalesque figure – a hauntology of a star. Similarly, *Pee-wee’s Big Holiday* (Lee 2016) seems to trade in this past-ness.

2. The term *MeToo* was coined by activist Tarana Burke as a way to connect survivors on a grass-roots level.

Disclosure statement

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Sean Redmond is Professor of Screen and Design at Deakin University. He is the co-editor of *Celebrity Studies* and the author of *Celebrity* (2018), and co-author of *The Fandom of David Bowie: Everyone Says Hi* (2019). He has research interests in stardom and celebrity, science fiction, the video essay, and eye tracking the moving image.

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