



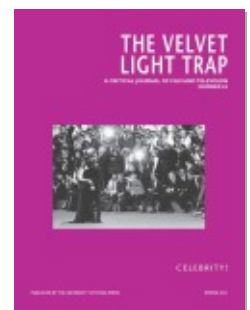
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## Introduction

The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 1-2 (Article)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0075>



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## Introduction

**T**he day the media reported that Michael Jackson had died, 25 June 2009, was only a few weeks from when the editors of the *Velvet Light Trap* would convene to put the final touches on this issue on celebrity culture and fame. Appropriately, Jackson's life—and even more so his death—animated such a spectacle of celebrity culture as to hyperbolize many of the claims made in this issue. Indeed, Jackson's memorial alone—part death tourism, part messianic idolatry, part retroactive foretelling, part sense making of Jackson's troublesome polysemy—illustrates the difficulty of understanding celebrity in the twenty-first century.

"Celebrity" for a media studies journal is always a topic that promises immense relevancy and dangerous outmodishness in equal measure. It is a Sisyphean task to attempt to explain and understand it in any comprehensive way, and this journal makes no declaration to be the final word on celebrity culture. Rather, like the scholarly "Snapshots" that rest between the more substantial pieces in this issue, this issue of *VLT* offers a flash of insight into this crucial and mercurial subject. It has been nearly two decades since Richard Dyer's influential *Stars* reinvented theoretical approaches to film stardom. In his text Dyer interrogated the social meanings we attach to screen icons and demonstrated how those meanings contribute to our understanding of ourselves and others. While his project remains central to star studies today, its exclusive focus on Hollywood stands at odds with a media environment in which the cinema's role in circulating the star image has been increasingly marginalized. In the years since Dyer's original publication we have witnessed the emergence of a global paparazzi culture that revels and wallows in the conflation between traditional notions of stardom and a more ambiguous obsession with "fame" for fame's sake.

The articles in this issue explore and expand our contemporary understandings of "celebrity." Independently, they consider celebrity's present manifestations in various forms: the global marketplace, tabloid culture, online gossip, political discourse, and Hollywood tourism, to name a few. In addition, to honor the ascendancy of the visual in celebrity culture, we have included ten "Snapshots": short, insightful meditations on revealing celebrity culture images from the last ten years. These pieces feature several prominent scholars in the field, including Racquel J. Gates, James Kincaid, Minette Hillyer, Priya Jaikumar, Moya Luckett, Michael DeAngelis, Fernando Delgado, Diane Negra, Sarah Projansky, Su Holmes, and Judith Halberstam. Together with the longer pieces, they provide an ample framework for understanding a topic that is forever present and yet always historically contingent.

Barry King gives us something truly substantial to chew on with "Stardom, Celebrity, and the Money Form." While it has become commonplace to distinguish stardom and celebrity, King makes a unique contribution with his economic analysis, arguing that stardom has always been based upon the exploitation of performance-based skills. As King notes, stardom is about the visibility of achievement, while celebrity is about visibility per se. The manipulation of stardom and star machines has always entailed some degree of celebrity. King claims it is only in recent years that the emphasis has shifted from achievement to the achievement of visibility, from stardom to celebrity. The celebrity becomes a transnational brand, "an abstraction marked by a name." King combines this analysis with a Marxist interpretation to argue that in the contemporary context celebrities are not simply commodities but in fact fit the definition of a money form, entities that have universal exchange value. For King, they are a pure expression of fetishized value.

With an altogether different take on the phenomenon of contemporary celebrity, Julie A. Wilson takes us into the world of tabloid magazines and examines the cultural politics of celebrity gossip with her “Star Testing: The Emerging Politics of Celebrity Gossip.” Rather than seeing these magazines as purely an instrument of capitalist exploitation of the celebrity commodity, Wilson turns to Foucault’s theory of “governmentality” and argues that we have shifted from being “star gazers” to become “star testers,” engaging with the discourses of these gossip magazines in order to evaluate and judge the intimate behaviors of stars within their pages. This “star testing,” which has become an increasingly mainstream phenomenon, has a historical-cultural tie to both the fan magazines of Hollywood’s older star machine and the trashier, less acceptable tabloids, such as the *Enquirer*. Moreover, as Wilson claims, this mode of engagement is uniquely positioned to train an emerging class of “younger, hipper,” postfeminist women.

A. Freya Thimsen, in “Populist Celebrity in the Election Campaigns of Jesse Ventura and Arnold Schwarzenegger,” reconsiders the political meanings

of these two men, who have often been considered demagogues. Working against this assumption, Thimsen examines them as productive sites within visual culture and how this in turn has impacted political culture. Drawing upon star theory to interpret the generic discourses surrounding Ventura and Schwarzenegger, Thimsen is able to identify how they activated certain political discourses in relation to “the collective,” “the people,” and “labor.”

In our final long piece, “Death on Display: Reifying Stardom through Hollywood’s Dark Tourism,” Linda Levitt reassures us that Hollywood stars can continue to be viable sites of production even from beyond the grave. Drawing upon fascinating original research, Levitt takes us to the graves of Marilyn Monroe, Janis Joplin, Bela Lugosi, and others. In visiting these sites tourists can access a narrative that is created by stardom and continues after the death of the star. But, Levitt suggests, only a true star can create such a narrative. Although “stars” such as Paris Hilton and Kim Kardashian may aspire to the stature of Marilyn Monroe, it remains to be seen which of their graves might someday be on Hollywood’s Dearly Departed tour.