

Capturing stars

media, literature and celebrity

YURI CERQUEIRA DOS ANJOS

Victoria University of Wellington
yuri.anjos@vuw.ac.nz
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5307-9395>

ADRIEN RANNAUD

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec
(GRÉLQ)
Université de Toronto
Adrien.Rannaud@utoronto.ca

MÉLODIE SIMARD-HOUE

Groupe de recherches et d'études sur le livre au Québec
(GRÉLQ)
Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières
melodie.simard-houde@uqtr.ca
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5140-0598>



rawing on works on modern celebrity culture (Lilti, 2014) and on the cultural and literary history of the press (Kalifa et al, 2011), this issue of *Sur le journalisme* examines the relationships between the press, literature and celebrity.

The following contributions draw on our knowledge of journalistic poetics¹ on the one hand, and written and visual representations of public figures, particularly literary figures, on the other, in order to show how they mutually illuminate each other.

MEDIA POETICS OF CELEBRITY BEFORE THE TABLOID PRESS

This issue focuses on shedding light on writings about celebrity, between the press and literature, from a media poetics perspective (Chabrier and Thérenty, 2018), paying attention to the relationship between media outlets and the writings they generate. Various types of periodicals are discussed, including daily newspapers, literary supplements, cultural journals and magazines, and illustrated weeklies. Each of these media formats shapes the representation of celebrities and writers through its media characteristics, its orientation (theme, target audience) and its frequency. There is not one, but many styles of celebrity writing, and multiple poetics of stardom. The elitist approach, which can be observed in the gossip columns of the

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end-of-the-century tabloid press, which masks the personalities of the demi-monde for the benefit of an audience of insiders (see the contribution by Blandine Lefèvre), is quite distinct from that of the illustrated weeklies of the 1930s or the mass-circulation press, which determined an ‘average’ treatment of writers, i.e. media coverage according to the codes of middle-brow² culture, such as news items or celebrity photography, as Marie-Astrid Charlier shows. The frequency of these publications also imposes different rhythms on the treatment of celebrities: literary supplements, because of their weekly frequency, are partially emancipated from the current events of literary life and closer to the anthological ambition of a collection, notes Aliénor Poitevin. On the contrary, it is sometimes the close link to current events, via the possible serialisation of literary news, that contributes to the ‘mediagenic³’ of certain figures. For example, the ability to periodically generate new events, such as literary award ceremonies, contributes to the media appeal of the *Académie Goncourt*.

In addition to formatting writing and imposing rhythms, the medium determines axiologies in the way celebrity is approached: in Quebec, for example, we see a prescriptive discourse in popular print media, which approaches celebrity with reserve, as shown in the study of the magazine *Histoires vraies* by Marie-Pier Luneau and Jean-Philippe Warren. Within the corpus considered by the contributors, we note the prominence of the press in the cultural metropolises of Paris and, on another scale, Montreal. Adrien Ranaud’s study illustrates how Montreal’s urban and cultural hub is inseparable from the birth of a celebrity press in Quebec. Before becoming a specialised sector in its own right, celebrity journalism flourished in news magazines and women’s magazines between the two world wars, blending coverage of stars with other topics favoured by these periodicals, such as cultural life, high society and topics considered to be of interest to women. The way celebrity stories were written obviously differed depending on whether they appeared in a specialist publication or in a periodical that covered other topics or had a more general focus. However, the articles that follow deal more with the period before the sectorisation of the celebrity press than with the celebrity press itself. As a result, part of the originality of this issue lies in its study of the origins of journalistic poetics of celebrity between 1850 and 1950, i.e., the period of media modernity immediately preceding the rise of the celebrity press as we know it today, when we think of *Paris Match* or *Échos vedettes*.

In addition to focusing on media outlets (daily newspapers, supplements, magazines, etc.), a media-poetic approach must pay attention to the effects of series and columns, as well as the journalistic genres that enable celebrity to be explored. The second half

of the 19th century, which saw the emergence of modern journalistic genres in the French-language press, revolutionised the treatment of celebrities in the press, who were now viewed through the prism of news journalism genres (interviews, investigations, reports), alongside older genres, such as portraits and biographies, which were updated to reflect media constraints. However, the journalistic poetics of celebrity remain partly rooted in the conversational matrix of the 19th century: the press at the turn of the century, but also that of the first half of the 20th century, was teeming with gossip, rumours, echoes and media micro-narratives (Pinson and Thérenty, 2008). Depending on the genre, the famous figure will either be the focus of the article or one element among others, surrounded by a halo of miscellaneous news items, for example, in a celebrity column that also covers artistic news. These genres oscillate between narrative and discourse: stories of lives, encounters and anecdotes rub shoulders with chatter and the development of a metadiscourse on celebrity, whether coveted or criticised. Accompanying the text, press images became a major vehicle for the media coverage of celebrities with the arrival of photography in daily and weekly newspapers at the turn of the 20th century.

WRITING IN TENSION

The media poetics of celebrity highlighted in the studies in this dossier can be summarised in a few oxymoronic pairs that reveal the tensions and contradictions at the heart of celebrity writing. A first tension between exposure and concealment, referentiality and fictionalisation, runs through periodical production. While one part of it exposes celebrities, naming them and composing, portrait by portrait, a gallery of stars, another part proceeds by smaller touches, by micro-narratives (such as the echoes and gossip of the tabloid press). A poetics of concealment reigns in the latter case; anecdotes are fictionalised, individuals transformed into types. The press article resembles literary allusions (Glinoyer and Lacroix, 2014), as Blandine Lefèvre shows. The rundowns of a secret feigned and transgressed by the journalist allows for revelations about the private lives of Parisian demi-monde celebrities, in a partial unveiling of their intimate lives. When it comes to television or film actors, the distortion of the subject, or the contrast between referentiality and fictionalisation, can also involve confusion between the real person and their fictional roles: the media coverage of television stars in *Histoires vraies* sheds less light on the private lives of the actors than on the characters they play, note Marie-Pier Luneau and Jean-Philippe Warren. Nevertheless, discourse on the revealed intimacy of stars became commonplace in 20th-century writings on celebrity, even in contemporary representations by writer-journalists, such as

Emmanuel Carrère and Florence Aubenas, studied by Madeleine Martineu.

While individual celebrities attract the attention of journalists, there is a second contrast between the media coverage of individuals and that of groups, institutions and literary schools. Marie-Astrid Charlier's study of the *Académie Goncourt* and, through it, naturalist culture, shows how individuals can serve to promote the media coverage of groups and vice versa. In other cases, press mediators choose to focus on the group rather than on an individual for ideological reasons, particularly nationalism, in order to praise an artistic or national community rather than a star, as indicated in the two articles on Quebec.

A third contrast lies in the hesitation between the sacralisation and desacralisation of celebrities. The press features genres and canonical representations that pantheonise literary celebrities, such as the scenario of visiting the writer's home, which has structured many interviews, portraits and photographs since the end of the 19th century. However, there are also many representations that place the discourse on celebrities on the side of laughter, entertainment and desacralisation: parodies, caricatures, micro-fictions and even snapshots can emphasise the incongruity that makes us smile or show the star in an everyday setting, a spontaneous gesture or an informal situation. Desacralisation can also occur, more explicitly, through the metadiscourse on celebrity, which sometimes works to reduce the aura of stars, as in *Histoires vraies*, where 'Téléphile' depicts the acquisition of fame as the product of luck.

In addition to the tension between sacralisation and desacralisation, journalists also play on the balance between distance and proximity. Desacralisation often relies on staging a relationship of complicity or closeness between the journalist and the celebrity (or even between the journalist, celebrity and audience), for example by resorting to anecdotalising and spectacularising the celebrities' words. Proximity can also be geographical and cultural: in *Histoires vraies*, the choice to focus on local television celebrities reflects a mistrust of international success. Is the life of celebrities of public interest in the same way in a minority culture (such as Quebec in North America) as in a dominant culture (such as France, particularly between 1850 and the Second World War); this positioning determines a different negotiation, on both sides, between local stardom and Hollywood tropism.

Finally, the tension between proximity and distance also depends on the effects produced by each medium, due to their specific modes of representation and uses: distance for film stars, familiarity rooted in the everyday lives of viewers for television stars. This

gap in the representations of stars associated with different media is reflected in the gap between the discursive models of the printed press and the transformation of media scenography brought about by the expansion of the media ecosystem in the early 20th century. The arrival of radio and then television, which established themselves as mass media in the 1930s and 1950s respectively, had an impact on the way celebrity was written about in the print media: new forms became prevalent, such as competitions and rankings, according to Adrien Rannaud. The interwar period, both in Quebec and France, also marked the transition from a more elitist press, focused on high society, to a popular press influenced by the American entertainment industry.

CROSS-USES AND CAPITAL TRANSFERS

In 1904, society columnist Jules Claretie described newspapers as 'the last salon where people talk' (p. 3), in other words, as an extension of Parisian high society (Pinson, 2008). In fact, periodicals offer a media platform that writers can use for various purposes. The articles collected here testify to the different ways in which writers use the press, particularly to increase their recognition and visibility and, by extension, that of their work, as Aliénor Poitevin shows. For them, it is a question of selling themselves, of helping to manage and orchestrate their visibility. This use of the press for promotional purposes echoes the metaphor of literary prostitution highlighted by Éléonore Reverzy (2016). From the 19th century onwards, with the book world entering the capitalist arena, writers who wanted to earn a living from their writing had to cultivate their visibility; the press provided them with an essential means of promoting their work or showcasing their literary projects, as in the case of Edmond de Goncourt, who actively promoted his future Academy in the media until the end of his life. The press can also be a means of acquiring social capital by building a network, constructing a certain authorial ethos or promoting an aesthetic, for example by publishing manifestos.

While the press is a potential source of economic, social and symbolic capital for writers, we can turn this observation around and say that newspapers (and journalists) that cover celebrities (literary or otherwise) reap multiple benefits. For newspapers, media coverage of celebrities can be a form of self-promotion that extends the organisation of events and makes the press a central player in social and cultural life. At the level of individual journalists, discourse about celebrities can also generate a transfer of visibility capital; journalists, particularly journalists who cover celebrities, sometimes achieve celebrity status themselves. There are also economic benefits: blackmailing

Parisian personalities was common practice in the tabloid press at the end of the 19th century, while for Eugène de Mirecourt, who specialised in biographies of his contemporaries in the mid-19th century, writing about famous people's lives was an important source of income, before becoming a source of ruin (when defamation lawsuits were filed). This case, studied by Marceau Levin, shows that promoting celebrity is a venture that can be as profitable as it is risky.

The media portrayal of celebrities is also a means of conveying ideological messages, for example, transmitting a given representation of gender roles (masculine/feminine), when traditional female roles are deemed to conflict with the lives of actresses. Furthermore, talking about celebrities can raise legal and ethical issues, such as the boundary between private and public life. As Marceau Levin points out, in 1854, Eugène de Mirecourt stated: 'Celebrity is a transparent house, where one can look in at any time despite the closed doors.' The writer-journalist thus claimed the right to talk about celebrities, insofar as these figures present themselves to the public. Is the life of celebrities for public interest in the same way as that of politicians? Raised by Mirecourt, the question is still relevant today, given that celebrities are seen as role models, in terms of behaviour and society. It is precisely this postulated influence that determines the moral judgements conveyed in *Histoires vraies* and justifies the approach of certain contemporary writer-journalists who write about others.

In addition to the resources that writers draw from the press to build their visibility and those that the press gains from talking about celebrities, we must also consider the ways in which journalists use literature. The latter can be described as a resource, suggests Adrien Rannaud: just like the journalistic sphere, the literary world allows for the construction of social capital. Literature is also used by journalists as a discursive resource to express their tastes and distinguish themselves. Furthermore, while writers use the press to build their visibility, conversely, some journalists borrow literary practices to assert their authorial status and accentuate their starification by activating the specific modalities of literary recognition (publishing books, receiving awards, participating in programmes or literary events). This dimension emerges from Madeleine Martineu's analysis of the media coverage of contemporary writer-journalists such as Florence Aubenas, Emmanuel Carrère, Sorj Chalendon and Ariane Chemin.

WHAT THE PRESS DOES TO LITERARY FAME

By discussing works, but above all by shining the spotlight on literary life, authors and institutions, how

does the press transform the terms of literary fame and, to a certain extent, the very definition of literature? This is another central question in this issue, which sheds light on how the press draws writers, institutions and groups into the logic of the media field, which is not entirely the same as that of the literary field: consumerist logic (turning writers into consumer products), the logic of entertainment, gossip and media sensationalism (Vérilhac, 2024), and the logic of middlebrow or popular culture, which raises the question of the democratisation of literature. This is central to Marie-Astrid Charlier's contribution, which shows how much the press contributed to spreading naturalist aesthetics in middlebrow culture by ensuring the popular success of the *Académie Goncourt* between the two world wars. Based on this case study, we can argue more generally that the media construction of celebrity contributes to the positioning of a writer, a group or an aesthetic in the literary field. It has direct material consequences (e.g. on book sales), but also affects the symbolic value of a work. Madeleine Martineu provides another example, showing how the influence of realistic writing, which award-winning and media-savvy writer-journalists have helped to spread in contemporary culture, has in turn led to transformations in the literary field, for example by prompting the creation of the *Prix du livre du réel* (2017), an award for non-fiction works. Just as the winners of the Goncourt Prize, Carrère and Aubenas embody a democratisation of culture through media celebrity. This is why the articles in this issue focus less on high culture than on popular and middlebrow culture⁴; literary celebrity is linked to visibility and publicity, and these are all the greater when the audience is larger.

By becoming figures covered by the mass media, do authors take on characteristics that distinguish them from other celebrities, such as sports stars or film stars? The answer must be nuanced. On the one hand, the medium plays a major role in placing authors within series of stars, which produces a standardising effect, from Mirecourt's *Galerie des Contemporains* to recurring columns and features. Even outside of series, journalistic media impose a grammar of representation linked to editorial codes or the generalisation of certain practices, such as instant photography. In the illustrated weeklies of the 1930s, authors were photographed in a manner very similar to that of sports stars or actors, in line with the visual codes used in the treatment of news and current events. The proximity between authors and other famous figures also stems from the fact that, as soon as we consider the construction of fame, the focus shifts from the work to the person. This observation is widespread in the following contributions: it is indeed the writer's biography, or even their face and private life, that attract the attention of the press, rather than their writings (without which there would be no celebrity, but only

literary renown). On the other hand, specific forms of visibility are reserved for writers; however, these are less related to media practices than to those of the literary and publishing world, i.e. the channels of visibility that authors use to promote their books, such as appearances at literary festivals and fairs.

Ultimately, the press and books are two complementary vehicles for literary fame. The press extends literary works based on real people, and vice versa, with the snippets of revealed intimacy feeding the curiosity of the public. Whether in periodicals or books, print media can work to build collections (of texts, faces), to create series, compilations and anthologies that effectively distribute visibility while deploying distinct relationships to current events. The studies in this issue note multiple links between media across all the periods considered: each new publication is likely to add to the fame of a particular person, fuel discourse, and create an event, so that figures who rely jointly on the press and publishing, from Eugène de Mirecourt to Florence Aubenas, maximise their visibility or the brand effect associated with their name. They are particularly likely to experience a reversal of roles between journalist and celebrity, which allows them to be both mediators of the lives of others and media figures themselves.

These two roles, which sometimes overlap, structure the contents of the issue: the first part, 'Featured Writers: Literary Celebrity in the Press,' brings together articles focusing on specific literary figures in order to shed light on the process of starification

to which they are subjected; the contributions in the second part, 'Writers at Work: Media Poetics of Celebrity,' focus on the role of journalists, specific media and the writing of stardom. Within each section, a historical sequence is favoured in order to highlight the continuities and inflections in the media during the period under consideration. To provide a brief outline: from the second half of the 19th century onwards, the news media multiplied the ways in which celebrities were portrayed, using genres based on the collection of information, and contributed to the formation of modern stardom. This century also saw the gradual crystallisation of the concept of privacy, which accompanied the emergence of modern media; the exposure of celebrities has generated, from then until now, a great deal of controversy and litigation. Alongside these two strong continuities from 1850 to the present day – the establishment of a press focused on news and information, and the dual movement of increasing exposure and protection of privacy – it is worth mentioning, even though it is obvious, the successive arrival of press photography, cinema, radio and television, which profoundly transformed the media ecosystem, reinforcing the role of transmedia circulation in the construction of celebrity. Each part of the dossier thus outlines this very clear transformation, which led from a star system dominated by artistic, literary and journalistic social circles to a transmedia star system, in which the audiovisual media played a key role from the 1930s onwards.

NOTES

^{1.} That is to say, processes and modes of writing journalistic discourse, examined through the lens of literary studies, following on from the work of Marie-Ève Thérénty (2007).

^{2.} For the intersection between the press and middlebrow culture, see Marie-Astrid Charlier (2024), who herself refers to the work led by Diana Holmes and Matthieu Letourneux (2017), as well as Adrien Rannaud's book (2021).

^{3.} A term coined by Marie-Astrid Charlier, building on the ideas of Philippe Marion (1997) and Thierry Groensteen (who suggests that 'mediagenic' refers to 'something that "works well" in a particular medium, something that is highlighted in that medium',

2005).

^{4.} The construction of these cultural hierarchies in the 19th and 20th centuries is linked to the massification and social stratification of audiences, the marketing strategies of cultural productions, and the construction of their value, which fuels strategies of distinction. See Levine (2010) as well as Holmes and Looseley (2013).

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