

**FTT 40492/GS 40378:
Media Stardom and Celebrity Culture
Fall 2006**

“The social history of a nation can be written in terms of its film stars.”

- Raymond Durnat

“Stars matter because they act out aspects of life that matter to us; and performers get to be stars when what they act out matters to enough people.”

- Richard Dyer

“[Studying stars?] Nonsense, no doubt! Nonsense from which the serious sociologist turns away in disgust, which is why no one has yet dared to study the stars. But our scholars betray their frivolity in their refusal to take nonsense seriously. Nonsense is also what is most profound in man. Behind the star system there is not only the ‘stupidity’ of fanatics, the lack of invention of screenwriters, the commercial chicanery of producers. There is the world’s heart and there is love, another kind of nonsense, another profound humanity.”

- Edgar Morin

“God makes the stars. It’s up to the producers to find them.”

- Sam Goldwyn

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Office Hours: TuTh 2-3:30 or by appt.

Seminar: TuTh 12:30-1:45, B043 DPAC

Screening: W 7pm, DPAC Browning Cinema

Readings: The majority of our readings will come from the course packet, which you can buy at the LaFortune Copy Shop. We will also read from two books, available at Hammes Bookstore or online: Joshua Gamson, *Claims to Fame* & Paul McDonald, *The Star System*.

Grade breakdown

Class preparation & participation: 20%

Reading reports & presentations: 20%

Final Exam: 20%

Term Paper: 40%; paper grade broken down into four components:

- proposal (due Sept. 28): 10%

- outline (due Oct. 31): 10%

- first draft (due Nov. 21): 30%

- final draft (due Dec. 15): 50%

Course description: Much of America’s contemporary popular culture – movies, TV, music, even sports – revolves around stars, yet few of us understand the implications of or even the reasons for our society’s fascination with fame and celebrity. This course interrogates the cultural phenomenon of

stardom and celebrity, focusing primarily on film and television stardom, from a variety of historical and theoretical perspectives. We will look at the development of the Hollywood star system, explore various definitions and categories of stardom, learn how to analyze star images, consider what the popularity of certain stars might tell us about issues of cultural identity, and question why celebrity is such an obsession today. Overall, our goal will be to develop tools for investigating the cultural and historical significance of stardom and to use those tools to uncover what stardom and celebrity reveal about both our society and ourselves.

Across the semester, no matter the topic, these are the questions we will be trying to answer: Why do stars exist, and why do so many care so much about them? What forms of pleasure do stars provide? What qualities define a star? What do stars mean to individuals and to society, and how do they function within our culture? How is a star image constructed? How is stardom created and consumed? How and why does stardom fade? What are the essential differences and similarities among different types of stardom, such as film and TV stardom or stardom and celebrity?

Other Basic Course Info

Class participation & preparation grade: This grade will be based on a holistic judgment of the quality of your preparation for and participation in the class. Please note that this is not an “if I talk a lot I get an A, and if I don’t talk much I get a D” kind of grade. Anything that illustrates an active engagement with the class and its issues, whether verbal, written, or through simply being an attentive listener, will constitute a contribution to the quality of the class and will count positively toward this grade. Thus, the path to a high grade for this area is to keep up with the readings and screenings; read, watch and listen to everything with a questioning, curious mind; generate thoughtful ideas and questions based on the course material and offer them to the rest of the class verbally and/or in writing in class (via “free-writes”) and outside of class (via our WebCT discussion board). The less you do any of that, the lower this grade will be for you. Feel free to talk with me at any point during the semester if you would like an assessment of how you’re doing in this area.

Attendance: You are expected to attend all class meetings. I will, however, grant you two free absences (whether “excused” or “unexcused”) across the semester. For every absence in excess of the two, the class participation & preparation grade will be automatically lowered by a grade level (e.g. A- to B+, B to B-, etc.).

WebCT: I have created a website for the course on the university’s WebCT Vista space. Here you can access additional discussion material, supplemental info on the readings and screenings, and a discussion board. To access the site, go to vista.nd.edu, enter your AFS ID and password in the top right corner, then in the course list, select FTT-40492-FA06-FTT-40492-01. From there, click on whatever you’d like to access within the site.

Honor Code: You are beholden to the tenets of the Honor Code for every aspect of this class (see www.nd.edu/~hnr/code). Plagiarism, copying, and other forms of academic dishonesty will result in an Honor Committee hearing and possible academic failure. Plagiarism is any instance of trying to pass off the ideas and/or words of others as your own, whether they are from published sources, web sources, or your peers. Come see me if you have any questions about what constitutes plagiarism or consult www.nd.edu/~writing/resources/AvoidingPlagiarism.html (yes, the word plagiarism is misspelled in that URL; a little embarrassing, don’t you think?)

Course Schedule

Week 1: Introduction to Star Studies

Aug. 22: No reading.

Screening: *American Cinema: The Star*

Aug. 24: Gamson, Introduction; McDonald, Looking at Stars & Stardom as a System; Gabler, "Our Celebrities, Ourselves"

Week 2: Stardom in Classical Hollywood Cinema

Aug. 29: Gamson, Ch. 1; McDonald, Making the System
Screening: *To Have and Have Not*

Aug. 31: McDonald, Controlling the System; Eckert, "The Carole Lombard In Macy's Window"

Week 3: Stardom in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema

Sept. 5: McDonald, Rethinking The System; Geraghty, "Re-examining Stardom"
Screening: *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*

Sept. 7: Gamson, Ch. 2; McDonald, "Stars in the Online Universe" (in reading packet)

Week 4: How to 'Read' Star Images

Sept. 12: Gomery & Allen, "The Role of the Star in Film History;" Dyer, *Stars* excerpts ("Stars as Images" & "The Construction of Character"); Dyer, "A Star is Born & The Construction of Authenticity"

Screening: *Pirates of the Caribbean*

Sept. 14: Kramer, "The Rise and Fall of Sandra Bullock;" misc. Depp material

Week 5: Stardom and Feminine Identity

Sept. 19: Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* introduction; Williamson, "Swimming Pools, Movie Stars"
Screening: *I'm No Angel*

Sept. 21: Curry, *Mae West as Cultural Icon* excerpts; Fiske, "Madonna"

Week 6: Stardom and Masculine Identity

Sept. 26: Connelly, "He Is as He Is;" Tasker, "Tough Guys and Wise-Guys"
Screening: *The Thin Man*

Sept. 28: Sweeney, "The Man in the Pink Shirt;" White, "I Can't Wait...;" Nochimson, "Introduction to the Importance of Couple Chemistry Under the Studio System"

***PAPER PROPOSAL DUE

Week 7: Stardom and Gay Identity

Oct. 3: Weiss, "Queer Feeling When I Look at You;" DeAngelis, "Introduction"
Screening: *My Own Private Idaho*

Oct. 5: DeAngelis, "Keanu Reeves and the Fantasy of Pansexuality;" Garber, "Bisexuality and Celebrity;" Ehrenstein, "Going Public"

Week 8: Stardom, Race and Ethnicity

Oct. 10: Wiegman, "Race, Ethnicity & Film;" Ana Lopez, "Are All Latins From Manhattan?"
Screening: *Rush Hour II*

Oct. 12: Beltran, "The Hollywood Latina Body as Site of Social Struggle;" Lo, "Charlie Chan Reborn as Jackie Chan in Hollywood-Hong Kong Representations"

Week 9: African-American Stardom

Oct. 24: Bogle, "The 1950s: Black Stars;" Alexander, "Fatal Beauties"
Screening: *Introducing Dorothy Dandridge*

Oct. 26: Sieving, "Pam Grier as Star Text;" Davis, "After Halle's Oscar;" Norment, "Halle's Big Year"

Week 10: The Labor Behind Stardom

Oct. 31: Gamson, Chs. 3 & 4

****PAPER OUTLINE DUE

Screening: *Taxi Driver*

Nov. 2: Lovell, "I Went in Search of...;" Smith, "Choosing Silence"

Week 11: Fandom

Nov. 7: Gamson, Ch. 6; Gross, "Little Soldiers"

Screening: *The King of Comedy*

Nov. 9: Gamson, Chs. 7 & 8

Week 12: Television Stardom

Nov. 14: Marshall, "Television's Construction of the Celebrity"

Screening TBA (not in Browning Cinema)

Nov. 16: Holmes, "Conceptualizing Fame in Reality TV;" Jeff Sconce, "See You in Hell, Johnny Bravo"

Week 13: Deviant Stardom

Nov. 21: Schmid, "Idols of Destruction;" Davids, "The Serial Murderer as Superstar"

****FIRST PAPER DRAFT DUE

No Screening: Thanksgiving

Week 14: The Decline and Death of Stars

Nov. 28: Fowles, "Decline;" DeCordova, "Star Scandals;" Trebay, "Being Bad"

Screening: *East of Eden*

Nov. 30: Morin, "The Case of James Dean"

Week 15: Wrapping Up Leftovers/Discussing Papers

Dec. 5: No reading.

Final Exam: Friday December 15, 10:30am

****FINAL PAPER DRAFT DUE