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Introduction: celebrity between invisibility and hypervisibility

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‘Celebrity’, writes Robert van Krieken in *Celebrity Society: The Struggle for Attention* (Krieken 2019, p. 9), ‘is about being highly visible to a broader public and possessing the capacity to attract relatively large amounts of attention’. Indeed, in our hyper-visual culture, stardom seems to be a predominantly ocular phenomenon: again and again, celebrities are described as individuals who ‘move on the public stage while the rest of us watch’ (Marshall 1997, p. ix), who have ‘capacity to attract “eyeballs” in a media-saturated, information-rich world’ (Marwick 2015, p. 138), or, in sociological terms, as figures whose ‘visibility’ is a form of capital that they can accumulate, convert and re-invest (Heinich 2012).

This raises intriguing questions about the limits of this regime of visibility. What happens when celebrities refuse to step into the limelight, or, alternatively, when they are over-exposed – all too visible? The three contributions to this Forum section tackle these questions from different perspectives, while focusing on public figures with different ‘degrees’ of visibility: Inger H. Dalsgaard analyses the literary celebrity Thomas Pynchon as an ‘invisible’, unavailable author; Sofia Pinto focuses on the mysterious, faceless street artist Banksy; and Susan Hopkins discusses the ‘over-exposure’ of sexuality and violence in the – so to speak – ‘aggressive’ public visibility of pop star Rihanna.

In the first contribution, Dalsgaard reflects on the difficulties of studying the ‘author-recluse’ Pynchon, famous for writing difficult, critically acclaimed novels such as *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1971) or *Inherent Vice* (2009), but also widely known as an author structurally disengaging from the ‘self-reinforcing publicity-celebrity mechanism’ of the literary marketplace and the celebrity industry at large. For decades now, the author has refused to be photographed, to grant interviews, or to be present at public events in order to receive literary awards. Dalsgaard argues that the case of Pynchon, precisely as he has abdicated authority of the interpretation of his work and public image, demonstrates how these come to be in the hands of his audience. She goes on to identify three parties that, in absence of the author himself, make Pynchon ‘visible’: literary critics, fans and the media. Each party has its own ethics while doing so: literary critics, familiar with Barthes’ (1977) declaration of the ‘death of the author’, are quite comfortable with the author’s silence. Media parties, however, continue to pursue Pynchon in a dogged attempt to draw him out into the public eye, justifying this with the claim that this would be for the benefit of the wider public. Fans, finally, not being a monolithic group, take up a middle position:

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they either explore or protect Pynchon's privacy. Somewhere in the field of tensions between these parties, the image of the author as an invisible author takes shape. In an autoethnographic move, Dalsgaard also foregrounds on her own position as both an academic scholar and a self-proclaimed 'aca-fan', reflecting on her own attempts to maintain Pynchon's invisibility in a commercial reality, while seeking approval from the scholarly community as well as the world of Pynchon fandom.

Invisible as well, but more strategically so, is the celebrity central to Pinto's piece: Banksy, the English-based street artist, known for iconic artworks in the public sphere, such as the famous *Girl with Balloon* mural. The fame of this work even increased when a print copy of it was shredded – made invisible, as it were – at a live auction. Pinto notes how Banksy's sustained anonymity aligns with a well-known practice in the graffiti and street art community: remaining 'unseen' as a street artist is a proven strategy to protect one's identity while engaging in activities that take place outside of the legal framework and to promote freedom of speech and artistic creativity. By adopting this strategy, Banksy 'subverts the logic of celebrity and its hypervisibility', Pinto states. However, she also observes that while Banksy may be anonymous, he has cultivated a recognisable signature look, that identifies his works as 'Banksy's', and that these, when formally attributed to, and especially when signed by, the artist, are bound to become more valuable. According to Pinto, this demonstrates that the classic theory of the 'author function', as proposed by Michel Foucault (1998), still holds. As in the traditional art world, the name of the artist, even when he cannot be seen, continues to identify a style, bind an oeuvre, and legitimate claims to ownership and copyright. Pinto concludes that Banksy's name and identity may remain elusive, but that the capitalist art world is quick to adapt to this strategy: as a brand name, he is now more visible than ever.

Hopkins, in the third contribution to this Forum edition, focuses on what one could call an example of hypervisible celebrity. Analysing Rihanna's career, she notes how the singer's fame was influenced by the leaked police photographs documenting pop star Chris Brown's assault on her – a clear case of images that were not meant 'for the public eye'. Comparing the various responses to the leak, Hopkins argues that it demonstrated that 'there is no "outside" to postmodern media (mis)representations' of celebrity – extreme visibility, it appears, is the fate of all stars. She goes on to describe how Rihanna has incorporated this unwanted visibility in her public image by aggressively flirting, in song lyrics and music videos, with eroticised violence, masochism, dysfunctional relationships and 'outlaw culture'. Hopkins concludes that Rihanna, by doing so, projects the image of an empowered, rule-breaking 'bad-ass', but at the same time plays into exoticizing, gendered and racialised discourses.

Interestingly, all three contributions conclude by raising questions about the responsibility of celebrity studies scholars with regard to the invisibility and hypervisibility of famous individuals. To what extent is it ethically sound to draw attention to celebrities that do not want to be 'seen' – and, by investigating them, perhaps lead the way for other, less prudent investigators? Dalsgaard, for example, is very aware of the risks and notes that researchers with an interest in celebrity, whether they cast themselves as 'objective, analytical academics', or as 'fans', should at least 'recognise the cultural fields and social systems' in which they, too, 'are actors, while interpreting celebrities'. Indeed, in which ways does celebrity scholarship play a part in the 'publicity-celebrity mechanism' as described

by Dalsgaard? Pinto, in her contribution, signals that ‘we’, as scholars with an interest in Banksy’s ‘game of hide-and-see’, ‘all play along’. Finally, Hopkins points out that the hypervisible appropriation of private, violent events, implies an ethical task for scholars as well: it is up to them, she claims, to ‘imagine alternatives to the ever-spiralling images and stories of eroticised violence’. How, then, are we as celebrity scholars going to come to terms with responsibilities that we ourselves might have when dealing with invisible, or hypervisible, celebrity? It appears that, with new privacy laws on the one hand and the ever-increasing demand for private details of stars on the other hand, we cannot afford ourselves the luxury of simply deciding to wait and ‘see’.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Gaston Franssen is Professor of Dutch Literary Studies and Intermediality at the University of Amsterdam. He has published on celebrity in the *Journal of Dutch Studies*, *Celebrity Studies*, and the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. In 2016, he co-edited *Celebrity Authorship and Afterlives in English and American Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan); in 2017, *Idolizing Authorship: Literary Celebrity and the Construction of Identity, 1800 to the Present* (Amsterdam University Press).

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