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Franssen, G.

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Sincerity and authenticity in celebrity culture: introduction

Gaston Franssen

Literary Culture, University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

In his Harvard lectures of 1969–1970, collected in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, the American critic Lionel Trilling (1971) at one point states, somewhat surprisingly: ‘Irony is one of those words, like love, which are best not talked about if they are to retain any force of meaning – other such words are sincerity and authenticity’ (p. 120). It is a puzzling remark that opens up a world of double layers and aporias. At first glance, it is tempting to assume that the statement itself must be understood as ironic: given the scope and ambition of Trilling’s book, it is highly unlikely that the author sincerely believes that his extensive reflections on sincerity and authenticity would not have elucidated the force of the meaning of these words. Yet if Trilling’s claim is indeed insincere, and if his irony thus reveals a rift between the performance of his public (lecturing) self and the inner beliefs of his ‘true’ self, then he proves his own point. After all, if his sincerity and authenticity are to be doubted (and echoing Sartre, Trilling even affirms that ‘we [are] all inauthentic’ [1971., p. 102]), surely his own words on these topics *must* be without any force of meaning.

Trilling’s self-contradictory remark does make two things clear, however. First, Trilling convincingly demonstrates how difficult it is to talk about sincerity and authenticity, as analytic reflection upon them requires a self-awareness and studiousness that seem to be deeply at odds with those very same values. Second, Trilling’s comments foreground the importance of these values for the public performance and perception of the self: it only takes a phrase considered to be ironic, or a moment of perceived self-doubt, for us to question the sincerity of one’s words or the authenticity of one’s persona.

It is but a small step from Trilling’s scholarly reflections in *Sincerity and Authenticity* on Shakespeare, Goethe, Marx, Hegel, Sartre and others to the contemporary domain of celebrity studies. After all, if in contemporary western societies the ‘true star’ is valued as ‘the epitome’ of ‘sincerity and authenticity’, whilst the mass media projecting the star are simultaneously ‘construed as the very antithesis’ (ibid.) of those qualities, as Richard Dyer (1991, p. 139) has famously suggested; then, celebrity culture can be understood as an endless quest for the sincere and the authentic. It is a culture that revolves around – to paraphrase Trilling – talking about these values, but also a culture of make-believe, artificiality and image control, in which it is profoundly challenging to determine what truly is sincere or authentic.

According to Dyer (2004), stardom is shaped by ‘a rhetoric of sincerity or authenticity, two qualities greatly prized in stars because they guarantee, respectively, that the star really means what he or she says, and that the star really is what she or he appears to be’

(p. 10). This rhetoric, which ensures a continuity between the public, performing self and the private, 'true' self, can be mapped in detail: in his analysis of the construction of Judy Garland's authenticity in *A Star is Born* (1954), for example, Dyer (1991) demonstrates how the 'rhetoric of authenticity' is 'established or constructed in media texts by the use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy' (p. 141). Garland's performance appears to include redundant gestures, moments of improvisation and off-screen intimacy, all elements that contribute to the suggestion that, even though we know the actress is performing, there is something real, genuine, or authentic to her performance – that we are offered a glimpse of the star's true self. This effect is important not only because it makes the celebrity appear appealing, reliable and worthy of our affective investments, but also because it 'authenticates' the social meanings that the star personifies: thus, Dyer describes authenticity as 'both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies' (1991, p. 137). These rhetorical patterns can be difficult to pin down, however: Dyer warns that they have their own 'in-built instability – yesterday's markers of sincerity and authenticity are today's signs of hype and artifice' (ibid., p. 141). Perhaps this unstable nature of the rhetoric of sincerity and authenticity even offers an explanation for Trilling's self-subverting comments on the difficulty of talking about authenticity, cited at the beginning of this introduction: what once may have been intended as a heartfelt admission of self-doubt, now strikes us as ironic posturing.

The authors contributing to this special issue of *Celebrity Studies* have accepted the challenge to speak of the slippery notion of 'authentication' in celebrity culture. They are not the first to do so, as there is a wealth of articles and studies on authenticating celebrity in the context of – to name but a few topics and references – Hollywood film (Dyer 1991, 2004), popular music (Tolson 2001, Littler 2004, Marshall 2006, pp. 150–184), politics (Street 2004, Wheeler 2013), sports (Cashmore 2016), literary authorship (Heinich 2014), television (Ellis 2015) and social media (Marwick and boyd 2011, Giles 2018, pp. 131–153); and scholars have extensively explored the relation between authentication and class (Holmes 2010), gender (Banet-Weiser 2012, Genz 2015), and race and ethnicity (Kooijman 2014). The authors in this issue acknowledge and build on this existing tradition of star and celebrity studies scholarship on authenticity, yet at the same time, they challenge existing ideas and present new perspectives: they offer insights from, for example, marketing research (Fleming) or new materialism (Kjær); they analyse unknown archival materials (Palmieri) and unique responses from audience members (Sobande; Kooijman); they map practices of authenticity across different media platforms (McDonnell and Wheeler) or cultural fields (Lutton); and they question the distinctions between the authentic artist and the sell-out (Ingleton and York; Wilkinson), between the 'star as image' and the 'star as real person' (Hermes and Stoete; Manganas).

In compiling this special issue, I have aimed for diversity in terms of the historical era, celebrity domain, media genre, and methodological approach. The order in which the different contributions are presented here, then, could have been a different one, as they resonate with each other in multiple ways. That being said, I suggest that the special issue can be divided into three sections, with a fourth section containing a selection of Forum submissions.

The first section contains two contributions that investigate 'patterns of authentication'. In her contribution on the use of Marilyn Monroe's star image as a strategy for Chanel to achieve brand authenticity, Ann-Marie-Fleming focuses on the 2012 Chanel commercial – a documentary-style presentation featuring previously unseen material. Fleming investigates the complex relations between celebrity authenticity and brand authenticity; subsequently, she demonstrates how Chanel, without a living star, constructs an endorsement that achieves authentication by using multiple 'layers of authenticity' – historical footage, gossip, and fan magazines. Katrine Meldgaard Kjær, in her article, directs our attention to the celebrity chefs Michael Pollan and Jamie Oliver. Kjær argues that their celebrity status is predicated on their authority and legitimacy as food activists. Analysing texts and performances that showcase their activism, she details how both chefs present themselves as 'expert recognisers' of 'fake' food; by doing so, she shows how their concern with authentic food ties back into and authenticates their own celebrity positions.

The second section of this issue focuses on 'contested authentication'. In her contribution, Antonella Palmieri focuses on the Hollywood years of the Italian actress Isa Miranda. Palmieri argues that as soon as Miranda started to work for Paramount, talk of her authentic Italian roots played into anxieties about American national homogeneity and the assimilation of European immigrants. Subsequently, Miranda's American image was artificially constructed in an attempt to establish her as a 'genuine' Marlene Dietrich type, so as to defuse the potential threat represented by her ethnic Otherness, effectively 'whitening' her. Authentication as a strategic response to anxieties is also addressed in the article by Pamela Ingleton and Lorraine York, but here the anxieties are experienced by the celebrities themselves: they are the result of the prospect of engaging with social media interactions. Ingleton and York analyse celebrities' first tweets on, and commentaries about, Twitter, as a mean by which celebrities negotiate their degree of reluctance to participate in this new type of online performance. Celebrity reluctance, the authors argue, is a complex signal of authenticity, underlining that celebrities are disinclined to perform, yet allowing them to perform nevertheless. The final contribution in this section is by Alison Lutton, who investigates how YouTube personalities that publish bestselling books engage in digital practices of authenticity. According to Lutton, the attempt of micro-celebrities to establish themselves as creditable authors can be understood as a type of field migration, which could pose a threat to their authenticity. Lutton discusses the strategies deployed by YouTubers to authenticate their creative labour and celebrity persona.

This issue's third section revolves around what one could call, invoking the concept of the celebrity intertext as developed by Michael Quinn (1990), 'authentication intertexts' – perceptions of (in)sincerity and (in)authenticity 'based on similar art/life connections in [the celebrity's] earlier roles, and also on the connections the celebrity provides between the roles themselves' (p. 158). The contributions in this section, then, explore the interactions between the authenticity of the celebrity itself and the authenticity of its performance or character. Francesca Sobande focuses on the star image of Viola Davis, the lead actress of the series *How to Get Away with Murder*, and in particular on a notable scene which depicts her character removing her straight haired wig. By analysing audience responses to this scene, Sobande reveals how the hair of famous Black women is read as an aesthetic signifier of the perceived (in)authenticity of their

Blackness, and how this is entwined with ideas about Black feminist politics. Interference between on-screen and off-screen performances is also addressed in the second contribution to this section, by Joke Hermes and Leonie Stoete, who investigate the online 'hate' for Skyler White, the main character of the series *Breaking Bad*, played by actress Anna Gunn. Hermes and Stoete describe how audience members conflate the fictional character and the real person playing her, thus creating a 'composite celebrity'. Mapping online responses, Hermes and Stoete argue that the reactions to this composite celebrity can be understood as supported by neoliberal changes in the public sphere and caught up in the devaluation of professionalism and professional status.

The fourth section of this issue, finally, present four Forum contributions – short, thought-provoking academic reflections themed on 'authenticating celebrity' as well. Andrea McDonnell and Mark Wheeler analyse @realDonaldTrump – Trump's Twitter account, and in particular Trump's use of Twitter during his 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, in order to better understand how political celebrities use social platforms to connect with followers and to enhance their authority and celebrity. Jaap Kooijman's self-reflexive contribution focuses on the role of one's personal identity in discussions of authenticity and African American superstardom. The authenticity of James Bond as played by Daniel Craig is the subject of Nicholas Manganas' contribution, in which he investigates the public reactions to the much-discussed choice to have Sam Smith sing the latest Bond theme song. Finally, Maryn Wilkinson charts how Taylor Swift authenticated her post-country persona by presenting herself as 'zany' – as a comical, clumsy figure working hard at trying to adapt herself to the world of commercial entertainment.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Gaston Franssen is assistant professor of Literary Culture 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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