

Russell Meeuf, *Rebellious Bodies: Stardom, Citizenship and the New Body Politics*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4773-1181-3. Paperback, 237 pages.

The rapid growth of new media and social media platforms in the twenty-first century has broadened both the concept of celebrity and the visibility afforded to popular figures. This development has been paralleled by the rise of celebrity studies in various scholarly fields in recent years.¹ Russell Meeuf's *Rebellious Bodies* firmly establishes itself in this context from the start, while revealing a self-declared continuity with ground-breaking work on Hollywood stardom and body politics, such as Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies* and Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies*.²

The link between the changes in the socio-cultural and political-economic landscapes in the USA since the 1980s is central to the book - in particular, multiculturalism and neoliberalism. It seems appropriate that Meeuf has chosen to explore this relationship through six case studies exemplifying the new body politics that have developed at this intersection in the last fifteen years. He argues that non-normative bodies such as those of the stars considered - Melissa McCarthy, Gabourey Sidibe, Peter Dinklage, Danny Trejo, Betty White, Laverne Cox - challenge the "cultural centrality of white, able-bodied, heteronormative masculinity" (4), offering alternative models of identity while becoming sites of cultural anxiety. Yet, as Meeuf persuasively demonstrates, multicultural and neoliberal discourses reframe and depoliticise these bodies as examples of an inclusive cultural citizenship fostered through individual narratives of

self-transformation and actualisation, which ultimately reaffirm normative models by redefining their boundaries. Significantly, he highlights the adoption of traditional middle-class gender norms as the “master category” in the configuration of neoliberal citizenship, which allows to “normalise” and mediate these bodies as safe objects to consume (10).

The six case studies might seem difficult to coherently organise at a first glance, given their differences in terms of gender, race and ethnicity, age, and ability. However, the intersectional approach adopted by the author guarantees an organic development of the argument throughout the book, effectively demonstrating how the different forms of oppression that non-normative bodies experience in contemporary US society overlap and inform their identity. A great variety of issues producing cultural anxiety, such as the obesity epidemic, the ageing process, or (illegal) immigration, are brought together, and further examined through the prism of post-feminist, post-racial, and post-disability discourses, central to the consolidation of “overcoming narratives” (26-7). Although explored in depth only in Chapter 5, post-feminism necessarily emerges as the link between the case studies, given the emphasis on traditional gender norms in neoliberal discourses.

Meeuf analyses a wealth of texts for each case study, integrating scholarly sources in the explanation of key theories with popular press articles and online magazines. Textual analysis of films and TV shows focusing on the body, performance, and themes related to identity is paired with the survey of para-texts, such as interviews, profiles,

TV appearances, and photoshoots, showing how they construct and circulate celebrity discourses. The analyses of tabloid pictures depicting Dinklage and Trejo's body as a text to be read stand out for their originality.

The book starts with two chapters that parallel McCarthy and Sidibe as models of "overweight femininity" in a culture preoccupied with obesity as a danger for the norm. Different dynamics are at play in their work and in their personae, which support ideas of self-transformation. Yet, the comparison throws into relief the differences between them, particularly in relation to class and race. While the divergence between McCarthy's work and persona is based upon a performance of class (white trash) conventionally associated with obesity, in stark contrast with her self-presentation as middle-class mum, Sidibe evokes a black, urban background that is instead negated in post-racial discourses, which privilege her self-realisation over racial inequalities. Sidibe's case also speaks to the use of these diverse bodies as tools for the actualisation of young, white, middle-class protagonists in fictional narrations, which Meeuf traces in the analysis of all the other stars.

Other parallels can be traced throughout the book, demonstrating a clear project at its base. While Dinklage is emblematic of post-disability discourses, where any political activism is disavowed, and Trejo exemplifies the anxiety over immigration in the US, both are contained through the adoption of a traditional, normative masculinity, which is articulated through sex symbol signs and middle-class family values, respectively. At the same time, the promotion of such a model in an aging star like Trejo relies on a

sense of nostalgia for a pre-second wave past. Likewise, White's risqué elderly lady persona supports post-feminist discourses as a nostalgic pre-feminist icon, suggesting that women were sexually liberated even before the 1960s.

The final chapter is of particular interest. The focus on Laverne Cox summarises many of the issues the book deals with and further reveals the contradictions that characterise star texts. Meeuf highlights how Cox, as a star-in-the-making, discloses possibilities and limitations of neoliberal citizenship, and offers some margin of negotiation between political activism and neoliberal politics. The contradictory nature of star bodies becomes a springboard to explore the contemporary socio-cultural context while offering counternarratives for different audiences. Rather than disavowing such oppositions, Meeuf critically embraces them, in accordance with his theoretical framework, demonstrating their significance in the understanding of a changing media landscape and society, while encouraging the reader to keep interrogating non-normative bodies.

Rebellious Bodies represents an original contribution to the current debate on celebrity, media, and society that demonstrates the importance of these non-normative bodies in mediating cultural anxieties and offering alternative solutions to them, albeit still limited within dominant discourses. The relevance of this book to different scholarly areas is enhanced by Meeuf's stimulating and accessible writing style, which could appeal to a readership beyond academia.

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1 See Graeme Turner, "Approaching Celebrity Studies", *Celebrity Studies*, 1:1, 2010, 11-20.

2 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986; Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and Action Cinema*, London: Routledge, 1993.