



INTRODUCTION

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The aim of this book is to examine the concept and the practice of stardom in the France of the 1950s and 1960s,¹ a period of French history that saw dramatic economic, social and cultural change. Our premise is that the ‘stars’ of a given historical period or moment capture their era for us in a range of ways: that the preoccupations, values, conflicts and contradictions of a particular culture, its ‘climate of feeling’, are vividly expressed through its celebrities. Stardom may be read as a symbolic portal into the nature of a culture, stars as that culture’s ultimate expression. At the same time, stars, by their very nature, are what most people are not, are symbolic *negations* of a given culture: they offer the new in place of the old; excitement where it has been lacking; the urbane to the provincial; glamour where there is none; and dreams to those whose dreams are unrealised. In our relationship to stars, there is often an element of idealised self-recognition, but there is also aspiration, desire and sometimes nostalgia. A study of stardom in a period of particular social change can reveal what is becoming and what is being left behind; what is being aspired to and what is being forgotten or denied. Stars can restate, often in new and modern forms, old identities and values, as well as calling a society towards newer, and perhaps confused, emergent values and value systems. The combination of the old and new was encapsulated in the phenomenon of French post-World War II stardom.

Stardom has been theorised mainly in relation to the cinema, and it is film stars who first come to mind when the word 'star' is used. Yet it is unmistakably the case that stardom goes well beyond the movies. Film theory has defined the star as 'a performer in a particular medium whose figure enters into subsidiary forms of circulation and then feeds back into future performances' (Ellis 1982: 1). The mass appeal of film stars is argued as guaranteeing their capacity to reflect and express a given culture: '[s]tars 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' (Dyer 1987: 19). Each of these statements can be applied not just to stars of the big screen, but also to that select number of musicians, sportsmen and -women, politicians, writers and intellectuals who seize the public imagination not just as exceptional achievers in a particular sphere, but also as part-mythified characters, at once compellingly different and reassuringly recognisable. Françoise Sagan, for example, represented a new kind of tough but vulnerable femininity for a vast national audience, not just for her readers, just as Poulidor meant strength, talent and the capacity to fail nobly for a public that far exceeded cycling fans.

Writers and intellectuals are rarely thought of as stars, but they are an essential element of our study. Particularly in this period, the intellectual dimension of stardom distinguished France from most other countries in character, and all others in scale. We find in the 1950s and 1960s a range of intellectuals who were household names, including Barthes and Lévi-Strauss. With Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, indeed, the intellectual and the popular cross paths, for they were themselves part of trendy Paris café society, along with celebrities such as the singer Juliette Greco. Even political stars such as de Gaulle were major intellectual figures, and the treatment, as we shall see, of a Poulidor race as a highly elaborate analogy of Manon Lescaut by a sports journalist borders on the surreal when one imagines Anglo-Saxon equivalents. The intellectual life as a hallmark of Frenchness, in fact, was one of the cohesive elements of this period of postwar stardom, from intellectuals as stars to politicians as intellectuals, from the intellectualism of cycling – originally France's truly working class sport – to the intellectual aspirations of singers such as Greco, or singer-songwriters like Brassens and Brel and even, to a minor extent, yé-yé singers such as Françoise Hardy. If this particularity provided France

with a sense of superiority over its giant, Anglo-Saxon cultural rivals, this needs to be seen in the context of a deep and growing opposite complex, namely, the anxiety of a cultural empire that was besieged from without and mined from within by repressed self-doubt, and fuelled by the literal end of empire.

The array of very different celebrities discussed in this book all functioned as stars in 1950s and 1960s France, and attracted the passionate interest of a large public, not just because of their beauty, talent or power, but because they combined performance in their field with the capacity to embody issues or emotions that felt relevant to people's lives. Although there is, of course, a world of difference between the ordinary citizen's relationship with a film star, a famous writer or a politician, in each case the public was fascinated not just by what they did, but by what they were, or what they seemed to be.

The study of what determines a star's appeal – the conditions of production, the qualities of performance – together with the analysis of the star-making process, should therefore provide an illuminating perspective on an era, as well as on the phenomenon of each individual star. The two decades that followed France's defeat and humiliating occupation were a period of intensive reconstruction, at both a material and a cultural level. Supported by US investment (Marshall Aid), France plunged forward into the consumer age, rapidly modernising industrial production and working practices, developing an ever-growing market in everything from domestic appliances to cars to beauty and leisure goods, rehousing the increasing population of the baby-boom years in great new suburban estates, and informing and entertaining most of the nation through the developing media of glossy magazines, French and Hollywood cinema, radio, and later television. Perhaps because of the dizzying speed of social change, the 1950s and 1960s also constituted a moment in French history when stars of cinema, sport, literature, popular music, intellectual life and politics all appear to have fulfilled vital symbolic functions for mass audiences, and to have formed a major part of the fabric of everyday culture. A comprehensive study of the important stars of the period would have demanded a book of encyclopaedic proportions. We have aimed, rather, to provide a set of case studies that 'capture' the period, framed by a theoretical and historical overview of stardom and of the era, that includes (in Chapter 2) a discussion of how stardom first came to be theorised in France in the 1950s by intellectuals, one of whom (Barthes) was

himself to become an iconic figure. The sheer number of major celebrities in those decades made choices difficult. Though there were many other contenders from the cinema (Jeanne Moreau for example), Brigitte Bardot was the French female star whose face and style most marked her era, internationally as well as nationally. Johnny Hallyday was the face and voice of French rock and roll, and Françoise Sagan the author whose fame went way beyond literary circles to make her a household name, as the best-known literary representative of 1950s youth culture. Raymond Poulidor was not the only iconic sportsman of his era, but he was particularly representative of some of the contradictions and tensions played out in the period's sport; nor was Jean-Luc Godard the only French director whose fame extended well beyond the public who appreciated his films, though he was more dramatically iconised than that other celebrity-director, Truffaut. Claude Lévi-Strauss is only one of the internationally celebrated French intellectuals whose impact on their era transcended, by far, their readership. Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir shone still more brightly in that intellectual firmament of 1950s France; here we have chosen a less obvious case of the intellectual as national celebrity, in order to demonstrate how deeply stardom penetrated French intellectual life beyond its three most famous exponents. A more exhaustive study would also extend to stars from other fields and media: French *chanson*, for example, produced its own stars in Georges Brassens, Juliette Greco, Jacques Brel and many others, and from the early 1960s, Guy Lux attained star status on the increasingly ubiquitous TV screen. Our case studies, then, are precisely that, and make no claim to cover the whole field.

Our first chapter explores the nature and function of stardom, seen not as a phenomenon limited to cinema or even the entertainment industries, but rather as a form of extreme, iconic celebrity that can be achieved by or ascribed to individuals from many spheres of public life, including politics and – particularly in France – intellectual production. Stardom in the postwar decades is set in the context of the period's dizzying economic growth and intensive modernisation, with all the social tensions and contradictions that this entailed. Susan Weiner's chapter shows how mass culture and its creation of new mythologies became a key object of inquiry for the new social sciences, most famously through the work of Barthes and Morin. Her analysis contrasts Barthes's critical focus on the alienating, mystifying function of mass culture, with Morin's insistence on the active

participation of the consumer, and willingness to position himself, as theorist, with, rather than above, the fans who make the stars. Morin identified teenagers and women as the main consumers of star culture; Diana Holmes asks what pleasures (and displeasures) could be found by women spectators – especially young ones – in watching and reading about ‘BB’, a star who was the iconic object of male desire, yet appeared to claim ‘masculine’ freedoms unavailable to her female fans. In the years preceding the renaissance of French feminism, did Bardot (as Beauvoir suggested) look forward to the post-1968 movement for sexual liberation, or merely add a new gloss to a traditionally objectified female sexuality? The popularity and success of Johnny Hallyday, the French Elvis, is seen by Chris Tinker in terms of the development of a technological, consumer and leisure-oriented society. Rock and roll music provided a focus around which young people began to forge collective identities, with terms such as *fan* and *copain* entering popular usage. Exploring how Hallyday reworks the tradition of the ‘rebel star’, Tinker’s chapter questions the extent to which he promotes youthful aspirations to autonomy and subverts traditional notions of gender and national identity.

If film and pop music were the most obvious sites of stardom, sport played a more vital role in the imagination of a large, predominantly male, and cross-class public. Philip Dine’s chapter explores the representation of France’s pre-eminent sports star of the 1960s, the cycle road-racer Raymond Poulidor. At the core of the sporting persona of ‘Poupou’ was the publicly enacted transition from authentic rural poverty to media-friendly superstardom, which effectively mirrored the general social mobility and growing affluence of the postwar decades. The late 1950s and early 1960s also saw the rise of ‘auteurism’, or the glorification of the film director as a recognised way of approaching cinema. Alison Smith focuses on the most iconic figure of the New Wave group, Jean-Luc Godard, whose significance in French culture is disproportionate to his film production (and audiences). She examines how a director comes to project a specific persona that is so clear and compelling as to have something like star quality, how this persona functions in both popular and academic culture, and what particular features of the period led to the emergence of a film director as a seminal figure.

As we have argued, in France the intellectual can be elevated to a ‘star’ status that would be unthinkable in many other countries. Christopher Johnson shows how the anthropologist

Lévi-Strauss is a prime example of this phenomenon, and examines how his celebrity status rested on concentric circles of legitimation: first an acclaim limited to his own discipline of anthropology, then, with structuralism, a much wider intellectual recognition, and finally, through his bestselling autobiography and the tailoring of his profile to the times, a level of mediated fame that went well beyond the academic and intellectual spheres. French national culture already had a long tradition of literary celebrity, but Françoise Sagan, who burst onto the national (later international) scene in 1954, was never just a famous writer but, in the phrase that she coined to describe herself, a 'starlette de la littérature'. Heather Lloyd examines how a complex variety of factors – from Sagan's own literary merit and exploits, to modernising trends in the book trade, to the role of the media and the emergence of a mass culture that was youth and leisure-oriented – meshed in the creation and commodification of Sagan as star.

In the postwar period one political leader stands out as central to both the political destiny of France and the national imagination. John Gaffney charts the way in which Charles de Gaulle, through his discourse and through symbolism, deployed a mythology of leadership and of national identity that would reshape French political culture. As the political star of the era, de Gaulle embodied in particular that fusion of old and new, national tradition and radical modernity, that marks the years between World War II and 1968. The exceptional political personality may function as a star when his role in the popular imagination extends beyond any practical political function.

The decades between the Liberation and May 1968 were, among so many other things, an age of stars, and in bringing together some of the diverse figures from that remarkable constellation, we can throw new light on a vital period of the cultural history of modern France, on the stars themselves, and on the nature of stardom.

Note

1. Our main emphasis is on the period of intense economic growth and development between the early 1950s and the cultural watershed of 1968. However, where a star's story demands a slightly wider timeframe (e.g. Hallyday, Godard, Poulidor), we have not imposed a strict definition of the period.