

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Jane O'Connor, *The Cultural Significance of the Child Star*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 190 pp. \$ US 95.00 hardcover (978-0-415-96157-8)

Jane O'Connor's book adds useful empirical material to research on celebrity culture and provides a convincing argument about the importance of child celebrities. In essence, the author suggests that "child stars" are exemplary cultural signifiers of the contradictions surrounding Western conceptions of childhood, and that is why they are first welcomed and adored and then subsequently represented as corrupted, tragic, and psychologically damaged.

O'Connor begins by detailing the social construction of childhood in chapters 2 and 3 (the introduction functions as chapter 1), using the established literature to focus on the "invention" and consolidation of Western concepts of childhood during the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries that promoted a key tension between innocence and impurity. Criticizing the developmental psychology that dominates understandings of childhood today — such as Piaget — the author shows how this paradigm supplanted anthropological research in the early 20th century that had suggested cultural variations of what childhood could be. Instead, we have a legacy that defines childhood as self-evidently distinct from adulthood, particularly in sexual, emotional, and labour terms, creating a dominant middle-class version of the "normal" child who does not work, and does not understand or display sexuality or self-consciousness. Above all, this makes normal children "innocent."

O'Connor acknowledges that exceptional children have also been idolized and praised, but that this has often been in ways that support normality by focusing on talents that all good children should have. In opposition to an apparent acceptance of the academically, musically, or physically "gifted," she argues that the realm of entertainment produces an almost universal disparagement of talented children — even as they may be drawing audiences and awards. Sketching a brief history of child actors from the Elizabethan age to the 21st century, the author demonstrates that there have always been concerns about child stars, from their exploitation by immoral parents or guardians to the forced nature of their labour and the corrupting effect it had on their innocence. Drawing on secondary material, the author provides examples of these concerns, fo-

cusing on the first Hollywood era of child stars in the 1930s and 1940s, and children on television from the 1950s.

This focus on the ways in which child stars are represented negatively provides the main empirical material, occupying the latter three chapters. O'Connor argues that child stars are represented as both powerless and powerful, and concludes with a detailed case study of Charlotte Church — a contemporary British child star — in the final chapter. The author's consistent argument is that "as the child star creates a position for him/herself in the wider society their threat to the rules governing the rightful place of children becomes evident, and the power of the media to cast a lifelong shadow on their lives is activated" (p. 77). She demonstrates how child celebrities are overwhelming characterized as "damaged and transgressive." This discourse is also reflected in the subject positions of former child stars, as shown by autobiographies and interviews in which their self-narratives are constructed through a prism of social stigma and psychological damage.

O'Connor also engages in a "structuralist" analysis of these representations to further her claims about the social "power" child stars also embody — illustrated most keenly by her detailed case study of the celebration, demonization, and eventual rehabilitation of Charlotte Church, a classical singer whose initial early teen career as *The Voice of An Angel* suffered after the media began focusing on her drinking, emotional outbursts, and change of musical direction. This case study illustrates both the power of the media to "cast a shadow" over a child star's public persona, and why that may be inevitable: child stars initially embody the Jungian idea of the "wonder-child" in our culture — the sacred Christ-like innocent archetype — but after this initial welcome and celebration, they transgress and disappoint by the mere fact of growing up, and so become subject to stigmatization and punishment.

Although O'Connor provides a range of material from newspaper articles, interviews therein, and books, the methodology is discussed too briefly. Discourse analysis is a valid approach to illustrate complex intersecting social values around childhood, morality, and entertainment, but a more detailed exposition of the methods and sample is needed to provide a clearer notion of how far the evidence can be made to stretch. This is particularly important in relation to some broad theoretical issues. Whilst discourse analysis can include an explanation of how hegemonic discourse creates subject positions in culture which individuals inhabit — explaining the internalization of stigmatized identities and the dynamic tension of the child star discourse — the author reverts at points to a posited "structuralist" analysis, without a convincing explanation of what that means in relation to her discourse analysis.

Overall, the point above is an illustration of a general lack of depth in this study in the theoretical and historical contextualizations which, combined with the brief description of the methods and sample, leaves a slight uncertainty about the evidence presented. For example, there could be much more use of the social history literature on childhood and gender/sexuality to deepen the context of the tensions between “demons” and “innocents” that has so structured Western childhood, and particularly the importance of managing childhood sexuality in such concerns. Moreover, consistent engagement with the literature on celebrity culture is curiously absent. For example, consumerism is mentioned as an important aspect of the functioning of contemporary media, but the function of “stars” in the consumption of media outputs and associated lifestyle products is absolutely central to the forms and proliferation of modern celebrity from the era of Hollywood right through to the present — eras that are the focus of this study. Celebrities, even child stars, cannot be understood without analyzing their meaning as individual discourses that connect the audience to a consumption nexus.

Furthermore, the literature shows that cycles of celebration and disgrace are inevitable within celebrity culture, encompassing all celebrities. This throws doubt on the key contention of this book, that child stars are both adored and despised because of the contradictions of their location as innocent/impure. But the huge proliferation of cross-media outputs requires audiences, and a dialectic of respect, ridicule, and even eventual rehabilitation of “stars” serves this purpose by making the destruction of a celebrity as newsworthy as their rise to fame — notoriety has an established place in celebrity. Nonetheless, this book is an interesting empirical contribution to the literature on celebrity culture, and its central theoretical argument remains convincing.

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