

# Pop Stars on Film: Popular Culture in a Global Market

*Kirsty Fairclough and Jason Wood (Eds.)*

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Dr Jan Butler

Oxford Brookes University

*jan.butler@brookes.ac.uk*

Fairclough and Wood explain that the impetus behind this edited collection was the 2019 Pop Stars on Film season of HOME in Manchester. International contributors were encouraged to interrogate “what happens when popular culture collides and coalesces” (3), paying particular attention to the appeal of such films to particular audiences, and exploring questions of access, diversity and cultural appropriation that pop stars in films can raise. Rather than focussing on the use of pop music in ‘jukebox’ soundtracks, or the presentation of pop stars in documentaries or biopics (real or imagined), the editors chose to focus on pop stars acting in a role as someone other than themselves, with the exception of a couple of instances where musicians appear in long sequences performing in full (5). No overview of how the different contributions meet the aims of the collection is provided, but in fact just over half of the chapters do focus mainly on depictions of pop stars as pop stars, real and imagined (see Chapters 1, 2, 6, 8, 9, 10 and 12). Of the remaining chapters, four can be described as focussing on pop stars playing non-musical characters (see Chapters 4, 5, 7 and 11). Chapter 3, while interesting, is hard to categorise in this context; Turman explores an unusual case of pop/film synergy in which the pop star (Prince) did not physically appear in the film (Batman), but simply provided songs for it. She makes a strong argument that Prince then absorbed and reimagined aspects of Batman’s world and imagery into his own audiovisual productions with lasting impact on his career.

Despite this slight lack of clarity about what the book is (or isn’t), the overall stated aim of the collection is met—the authors do consider questions of audience appeal, and of representation and diversity, within a range of global markets. There

is also a lean away from detailed considerations of the music associated with these stars here to an understandable focus on the visual, although the genres embodied by these pop stars are often important. The academic rigour of the chapters varies; while some offer descriptive accounts of films or stars, or insightful close readings, others develop theoretical frameworks to analyse the impact of the pop star in the film in question. Two themes arise most strongly across the chapters—the importance of the pop star persona, and the pop star as symbol or originator of political change.

The concept of the pop star persona on film is most comprehensively theorised by Attah in his analysis of performances by Little Richard (Ch1). Attah introduces Allan Moore's idea of a pop performer as always enacting different selves: the 'real self', putting on a costume, the persona delivering the performance and the fictionalised 'I' within the song they are performing. Attah combines this with theories of stardom from film studies, arguing that the stardom of Little Richard (and by extension, other music stars) is maintained through recurrence and continuity across multimedia—in each case performing recognisable iterations of the pop star persona. This star persona then becomes accepted by audiences as an expression of the star's 'real self', despite also being a performed construction. In this reading, 'Little Richard' is always a star performance by Richard Wayne Penniman. This reading of the pop star as always constructed and performative (also alluded to in Adamson's Foreword) is a useful underpinning for the chapters that follow.

Of the wide range of pop stars presented here, it is noticeable that the few stars who have had longevity and/or success as actors, such as Bowie, Madonna, and Johnny Hallyday, are chameleonic or have self-consciously constructed personas in their musical life as well as on screen. As King argues in his analysis of Bowie's screen career (Ch4), performing in a range of different roles on screen is a natural extension of the regular shifts in performance persona and musical style of stars such as Bowie, and thus can reinforce their overall pop persona of someone who regularly reinvents themselves.

Conversely, the collection demonstrates that pop stars who have more static pop personas outside of the world of film tend to appear on screen acting in relation to that particular persona, either reinforcing it or deliberately acting against it. In some cases, the coherence of the star's persona and image is such that it can be used as a symbol of an entire genre, as is convincingly argued to be the case with John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) and Jordan in Hayward's exploration of punks in film (Ch7). At times, the strength of a pop star's musical persona even seems to infiltrate the analysis undertaken of them—for example Smith's account of Kylie Minogue (Ch5), appearing against type in *Holy Motors*, assumes that her career has been largely controlled by others in the stereotypical way of the mainstream pop star, whereas the quotes included from Minogue, and a long view of her career suggests a series of self-directed reinventions to create 'Kylie'.

There are several cases included here where the director wanted to cast a 'real' pop star, but didn't have anyone particular in mind—the star is cast less for their individual persona and more as a symbol of pop stardom, and in some cases as a means to market a film to a particular audience. Wood tells us that *Merry Christmas*, *Mr Lawrence*, for example, was planned from the outset to have two pop stars in the central roles, one to represent the East, one to represent the West (Ch11). Willis (Ch6) explores how it was standard practice for French music stars in the 50s and

60s to expand their audience through crossing over into Hollywood films and vice versa, and conversely explores how the pop star can be used as a means to critique the constructed nature of stardom, as in Godard's films that used music stars, a tactic also effectively explored by Smith (Ch5).

As several authors explore, the casting of pop stars has a complex relationship to art and commerce. Matheson demonstrates how the counterintuitive casting of INXS star Michael Hutchence in *Dogs in Space*, a fictionalised account of the Melbourne postpunk scene, helped the film reach a mainstream audience, and also allowed Hutchence to explore an alternate pop persona far from his more controlled INXS appearances (Ch12). In Ahmed's discussion of depictions of pop stars in Indian Cinema, all of which are fictional examples portrayed by actors, it is partly the potential for financial success of pop stardom, as well as the freedom of self-expression that music provides, that offer the various characters opportunity both to escape their oppressive backgrounds and become a voice for marginalised groups (Ch8).

The other key theme that emerges from the chapters is the potential for pop stars on screen to represent marginalised groups, and the possible political ramifications of this. This is particularly obvious in the discussions of the impact of the inclusion of Black musicians within white dominated narratives. Halligan writes a detailed account of the impact of the inclusion of a performance by Mahalia Jackson at the funeral of Black maid Annie at the close of *Imitation of Life* (1959), which initially appears to be primarily about a white actress (Ch9). Drawing on Fanon's theories of the complexities of how Black people negotiated living in predominantly white society in the 1950s, Halligan offers a convincing argument that the inclusion of Jackson's performance here effectively sanctified and Négritudinalised Annie and in doing so makes her struggles the primary narrative of the film, not the white woman that she works for.

Attah argues that the film performances by Little Richard had broader political and cultural impact—forging a new style of Black representation on screen, drawing on aspects of queer Black culture. Meanwhile, Richard's status as the embodiment of rock and roll on screen allowed him to be portrayed in prolonged sequences in white spaces, acting in a ground-breaking and sexually explicit manner at a time of miscegenation and making clear the Black roots of rock and roll to a large white audience.

Finally, Graham considers how attempts were made to authentically capture jazz in *Round Midnight*, and the potential problems inherent in the portrayal of Black jazz musicians in the context of French (white) jazz culture (Ch10).

Moving away from considerations of race, Perks' discussion of Madonna, whilst partly focussing on the singer's relevance to cultural studies, raises interesting questions about Madonna's relationship to gay culture, primarily in her documentary, *Truth or Dare*, and asks whether she is appropriating queer culture or acting as an intersectional ally (Ch2). Ahmed's consideration of the portrayal of marginalised groups in Indian cinema is similarly nuanced—are these characters providing alternative narratives for marginalised groups in India, or is their break for freedom from their circumstances perpetuating stereotypes about those groups?

Overall, this is a welcome addition to the study of pop on film, including a useful range of case studies and pointing towards theoretical frameworks for the

interpretation of the symbolism and creation of pop star personas, and the potential political and commercial impacts of these on screen.