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John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, eds., *Stardom in postwar France*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007. viii + 239 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$75.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-84545-020-5.

Review by Tamara Chaplin, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Modern celebrities, it is often claimed, are cultural fantasies incarnate. Yet, as John Gaffney and Diana Holmes observe in their edited collection, *Stardom in postwar France*, stars can also represent the “symbolic *negations* of a given culture” (p. 1). Indeed, according to Gaffney and Holmes, it is the star’s paradoxical capacity to simultaneously embody both the ambitions and interests of a particular moment *and* to serve as an era’s seductive antithesis, which renders this figure a valuable vehicle for the study of history. And it is for this reason, they assert, that an analysis of the celebrities who captured the French imagination during the postwar period provides us with such a nuanced portal into three decades of rapid-fire economic, political and social change.

*Stardom in postwar France* unites essays on individuals drawn from the realms of cinema, music, literature, politics, sport and (*bien sûr*) academia—(the latter category of which, to riff off Vanessa Schwarz, “is just *so* French!”).<sup>[1]</sup> Given that these celebrities are taxed with communicating the zeitgeist of an entire epoch, the volume is immediately confronted with two problems: who should be included and on what basis? While some of the choices are stock (it would be hard to imagine a collection such as this that did *not* treat Brigitte Bardot, Johnny Hallyday, or Françoise Sagan), others are more eclectic—or even perplexing—and with mixed results. A chapter on the cyclist Raymond Poulidor, for example, who is barely known outside the hexagon (and who, under the nickname *l'éternel second* is celebrated more for his failures than his victories), proves, for reasons to which I shall later return, a brilliant choice. The inclusion of Jean-Luc Godard, the self-appointed exemplar of the international cinematic sensation known as *La Nouvelle Vague*, and of Charles de Gaulle (whom the late Tony Judt cited on his short list of “most influential people in Europe since 1945”) seem equally judicious (if for widely different reasons).

On the other hand, despite his evident importance, I find the decision to feature anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss as the book’s representative intellectual (rather than mega-celebrities Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir or Albert Camus), disappointing. Not because the editors’ argument is indefensible (they claim that Lévi-Strauss better demonstrates “how deeply stardom penetrated French intellectual life beyond its three most famous exponents,” but rather because in a volume so beautifully suited for introductory use with undergraduates, brief chapters on these other increasingly under-studied (at least in history classrooms) but paradigmatic figures would have been extremely useful (p. 4). But allow me to set aside—for the time being—such minor criticisms, while we explore this marvelously readable collection in greater detail.

What is the *sine qua non* of stardom? The person? The public? Or the media machine? The introduction and first chapter, collectively penned by editors Gaffney and Holmes, theorize responses to these questions while providing a broader historical context for the individual

biographies that follow. Following Richard Sennett and Edgar Morin, Gaffney and Holmes describe stardom as a fundamentally modern phenomenon, one that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century when a social propensity to personalize the public realm found support in a mass media that was developed to promote advanced capitalism. Ideologically, they claim, capitalism champions a worldview in which the star exemplifies the individual as free from the constraints of economic and class determinism. In this system, consumer choices promote the familiar fantasy of social advancement: buy this dress and you too can “be” Brigitte Bardot. However, they caution, the public is far from passive. Accordingly, stars also need to appeal to multiple audiences, a fact that further complicates the interactive relationship between celebrities and their fans. Gaffney and Holmes ultimately determine that those who succeeded in France in the second half of the twentieth century did so in large part because they served as powerful symbols of both old and new ways of life—and in so doing helped both to resolve and to hide the kinds of social unrest that France’s remarkably speedy postwar transformation enjoined.

Gaffney and Holmes succeed in whetting our appetite for the stars. Unfortunately, chapter two, “1950s Popular Culture: Star-Gazing and Mythmaking with Roland Barthes and Edgar Morin,” takes an unexpected turn. To be sure, Susan Weiner’s essay is more than tangentially relevant; it offers a smart analysis of how these two French intellectuals identified and then understood the renewal of “mythic thinking in...industrial society”(p. 28). Comparing Barthes’ 1957 *Mythologies*, with Morin’s shorter essay, *Les Stars* (written in the same year) Weiner reminds us of the vital role—via the linguistic turn and what she calls the “long-ignored” “anthropological humanist alternative”—that French intellectuals played in the development of cultural studies (p. 28). But if this chapter usefully describes how two great social theorists address stardom as a potent social force, as a work of literary theory it nevertheless sits uncomfortably in the midst of what is otherwise a collection of social history essays. Indeed, it is not until we move on to Diana Holmes’ essay, “‘A Girl of Today’: Brigitte Bardot,” in chapter three, that *Stardom in postwar France* hits its stride.

In the 1950s and 60s, French social imperatives privileging motherhood, femininity and domesticity clashed against demands for social and sexual freedom. Generational differences exacerbated discord; French youth pulsed to jazz and rock n’ roll, New Wave cinema and student café culture flourished, and new commodities—from transistor radios to cars—reshaped the geography of daily life. French women exercised unprecedented political powers (they were granted the vote in 1945), but in the private sphere the state remained in control (contraception was unavailable until 1967 and abortion illegal until 1975). It was against this backdrop, as Diana Holmes remarks, that Brigitte Bardot (or “BB” as she came to be known), with her insouciant, impulsive demeanor, full sensual mouth, pert breasts, tousled blonde mane and lithe legs, became one of postwar France’s biggest international screen sensations. By 1956, when BB’s performance made *Et Dieu créa la femme* a succès de scandale with American audiences, she had come to embody a new type of “liberating and liberated figure” for French women (p. 42). But, as Holmes maintains, Bardot’s brand of sexual emancipation was far from straightforward. She was also, “an extreme case of the glorification and fetishisation of the female body as sex object” (p. 42). From this perspective, Bardot epitomized “women’s (hetero)sexual availability” and actually buttressed a “highly conservative politics of gender” rather than supporting the kind of self-conscious sexual power that her female fans admired (p. 42). In keeping with *Stardom’s* central thesis, Holmes’ chapter persuasively shows how Bardot’s capacity to simultaneously reinforce social ideals of female emancipation and male dominance was historically pertinent to her success. More interestingly still, Holmes’ argument that both in life and on-screen, Bardot ultimately capitulated to patriarchal norms, helps us better understand not only BB’s unique appeal during her film career (which ended in 1973), it also

helps explain the star's later xenophobic political affinities--evident in her bestseller, *Un cri dans le silence*, in which she rails against non-Europeans and the so-called 'Islamisation of France.'

Chapters four and five, "Rock 'n' Roll Stardom: Johnny Hallyday," by Chris Tinker, and "Stardom on Wheels: Raymond Poulidor" by Philip Dine, address two different styles of masculine celebrity in postwar France. Both authors are arguing that their subjects--France's answers to Elvis Presley and (to a point) Lance Armstrong--should be taken more seriously. But if it is true that Hallyday was "one of the most prolific, enduring and visible features of the popular music and the mass media in France," while Poulidor ranked as "France's preeminent sports star of the 1960s and 70s,"--despite having competed fourteen times in the *Tour de France* without ever once winning--why then, did neither man become a star of international proportions (pp. 67, 94)? And why has neither attracted much scholarly attention? Tinker and Dine's studies hammer home two of this volume's key points: the first is that in bourgeois French circles, longstanding biases against mainstream popular culture (seen as neither traditional nor *avant-gardiste*), die hard. The second is that, despite such prejudices, the nostalgic yearnings of postwar French audiences should not be underestimated.

Regarding the first point, Tinker reminds us that Hallyday never acquired the kind of cultural cachet associated with Jacques Brel, Georges Brassens or Edith Piaf, both because he failed to participate in the venerated tradition of the French *chanson*, and because his celebrity was based largely on conforming to, rather than challenging social norms. Regarding the second, Dine likewise reveals that it was because cyclist Raymond Poulidor was so "reassuringly familiar" (from his peasant roots to his "'cuddly' pet name"--"Poupou"), that a wistful French public took him to heart (p. 114). Poulidor's celebrity is particularly compelling, as Dine remarks, precisely because, based as it was on near-misses rather than athletic victories, it provided "*la France profonde*" with a comforting counter-narrative to all that was frightening about French society's new romance with technology and modernization.

"Can a director be a star?" This is the question that opens chapter six, Alison Smith's examination of New Wave cinema sensation Jean-Luc Godard. Smith identifies two caveats to a positive response; first, a director must attract a broad (even international) public, and second, audience appeal must hinge on the man [sic], rather than on the work he produces. Smith concedes that, in the case of Godard, the *Nouvelle Vague's* emphasis on the director as "auteur," was pivotal. But while New Wave's "auteur theory" supported both an interest in Godard's private life and emphasized the director's role as a creative artist, Godard's celebrity was also dependent, Smith argues, on his genius for self-promotion. It was because he mastered the marketing machine so exquisitely that Godard came to exemplify French New Wave film. As the self-appointed spokesman for a new generation, Smith maintains that Godard's stardom was also founded on his capacity to represent the cutting edge of French cultural innovation in a way that was both safe and familiar to mainstream audiences. To this end, she continues, Godard consolidated his reputation by styling himself as a "commentator rather than a polemicist," on the politics of the day (p. 146). While I would agree that the ambiguity inherent in the arguments of films such as *Le Petit Soldat* (which treated the issue of torture in the Algerian conflict), amplified Godard's appeal by generating controversy, I think Smith sells Godard a little short. His approach, which forces viewers to interrogate their own (often unexamined) beliefs about topics like gender, sex, class, violence and consumer society, performs an expressly political act, even if not an explicitly partisan one. In fact, as Smith herself observes, it was the filmmaker's return to politically topical issues in the early 2000s (after a brief flirtation with more popular cinematic styles in the 1980s), that ultimately ensured his ongoing status as a cultural icon.

There is no better plea for how stars reflect national specificities than when *Stardom* turns its attention to the peculiar phenomenon of French intellectual celebrity. Christopher Johnson's assessment of Claude Lévi-Strauss makes a three-pronged argument. First, Lévi-Strauss's work garnered critical admiration from his peers. Second, his allure was bolstered by the rising importance of structuralism within the academic field. And third, both the man and his ideas excited "extra-academic mediation"—a process particularly stoked by interest in Lévi-Strauss's autobiographical 1955 work, *Tristes tropiques* (p. 154). The question of why and to what end France celebrates its intellectuals is a worthy one, and Johnson handles his exploration of this particular thinker's appeal with aplomb. It is the way that Johnson seeks to explain how the media amplified the anthropologist's fame that gives me pause.

My hesitation stems from the sources that Johnson deploys in support of his argument: the radio interview and the photograph. Given Johnson's evident interest in Lévi-Strauss as a visual icon, I'm curious about his failure—replicated for the most part in the collection as a whole—to discuss the pivotal role of television in cementing stardom during the postwar era. [2] Johnson bases his case for the importance of the interview on his reading of the published texts of radio broadcasts that Lévi-Strauss conducted with Georges Charbonnier in 1959. Although radio was undoubtedly important, Johnson disregards the over fifty TV documentaries, interviews and book shows that were critical to the celebrity that Lévi-Strauss attained. Such sources would further support the attention that Johnson pays to the power of the photographic image—attention that is especially welcome (and somewhat under-theorized) in a book of this type. Problematically, however, when he does move to photographs, Johnson chooses to focus his discussion on two pictures, neither of which is reproduced in the text—a fact that both frustrates and hinders our capacity to engage with his analyses.

No treatment of postwar French celebrity would be complete without a discussion of the precocious, wicked brilliance of writer Françoise Sagan. As is well known, Sagan's prize-winning first novel, *Bonjour Tristesse* (1954) catapulted the eighteen-year-old author into the international limelight. She was, Heather Lloyd contends in chapter eight, both one of the first and one of the most important celebrities of the postwar era. Like many of the figures treated in this volume, Sagan's fame accrued from a specific set of variables: like Bardot, her image was extensively circulated by the print media; like Godard, she was seen as emblematic of a new generation; like Lévi-Strauss she was a member of the literary elite.

Once again, we see the importance of international reputation and the salience of personal biography in the construction of stardom. And once again we see the significance, in this postwar moment, of a star's ability to capture the cultural contradictions of the time. Sagan's demure ("almost staid") look and her conservative, bourgeois roots were countered by her predilections for whiskey, gambling, fast cars, night-clubbing, and sexual adventure—all shocking in one so young. In this way, Sagan reiterates what is perhaps the most important message that this collection offers: that fame came to those celebrities who were able to incarnate the especially conflicted set of desires and aspirations—for stability and change, tradition and modernity—that beset the French nation in the decades that followed the second World War. While *Stardom* also pays heed, on the whole, to the media construction of celebrity, Lloyd's chapter is among the few that emphasize the commercial impact of this process. Sagan's self-acknowledged status as "a commodity, an object" was, as Lloyd astutely observes, indicative of how consumer culture made a vital contribution to the economic boom that reshaped the France of *les trentes glorieuses* (p. 190).

Editor John Gaffney pens *Stardom's* final essay, an elegant assessment of the Napoleon of contemporary French politics, Charles de Gaulle. Not only, Gaffney asserts, was de Gaulle a star himself, but also, "in many ways [he] made France itself a star again" (p. 199). "In a sense,"

Gaffney continues, “both stardom and modern politics are the products of the rise of mass society”(p. 200). What Gaffney makes explicit are the connections between the two. Particularly interesting, is that while other scholars (such as Jean K. Chalaby), contend that we cannot understand de Gaulle without examining his mastery of the media, Gaffney implies that we cannot understand “French-specific stardom” unless we tie it to a “long tradition of political leadership”(p. 202).<sup>[3]</sup> Key to de Gaulle’s influence, Gaffney observes, was his ability to use stardom as a vehicle for democracy and republicanism (both traditionally cautious toward the cult of the individual) while also incarnating the mythic category of the questing hero. By appealing to multiple audiences—the core, the political elites, and the French people—de Gaulle expanded the orbit of his power and influence. Gaffney’s closing point that, following de Gaulle, “some kind of stardom became an imperative of political imagery and strategy” in France proves a fitting finale (p. 217). Few would dispute this claim about a nation that now lives under the dominion of Nicholas Sarkozy and his top-model rock-star wife.

While *Stardom’s* argument that French celebrities were inseparable from the era’s new media would have been strengthened by more concrete engagement with the sources in which this interaction took place (from publishing, to journalism, to radio, to television), its assertion that fame was impossible without the diffusion of a public persona via the varied circuits of mass-communication is solid, if not particularly new. Of course, such claims are not specific to France. This highly enjoyable and provocative book nevertheless convincingly demonstrates that celebrities are pivotal sites for the historical analysis of national identity. Those figures that attracted public attention were all able to incarnate the aspirations and anxieties that shaped France in the postwar moment. And it is through examining icons like Bardot, Hallyday, Poulidor, and de Gaulle, the authors insist, that we gain insight into the social concerns of the day. Why the post ’68 era failed, in their view, to produce a similar gamut of stars, remains an intriguing point of departure for future research.

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John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, “Conclusion”

## NOTES

[1] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *It's So French!: Hollywood, Paris, and the Making of Cosmopolitan Film Culture* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[2] For my discussion of the relationship between intellectual celebrity, television and national identity, see, Tamara Chaplin, *Turning On the Mind: French Philosophers on Television* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[3] See, Jean K. Chalaby, *The de Gaulle Presidency and the Media* (Houndsmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002).

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