

### **Stars (2nd Edition) by Richard Dyer**

According to Richard Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies*, "stars 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, 1986). Dyer explores that very same idea in his seminal work, *Stars*, identifying what exactly makes a star, and what a star says about the society in which we live. Richard Dyer, renowned film studies professor at the University of Warwick, wrote *Stars*, originally published in 1979, as the first in-depth examination of celebrity culture. Today, Dyer's star theory remains the most widely used approach in star image analysis.

Analyzing the on and off-screen texts of popular film stars, including Marlon Brando, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Jane Fonda, Greta Garbo, Robert Redford, Marilyn Monroe, and John Wayne, Dyer attempts to reveal how and why the social phenomenon of stardom exists. These popular screen icons are studied both as semiotic constructions, analyzing and deep-reading the texts within which they appeared, and as expressions of cultural contingency, discussing the historical dialogue between celebrity and society. *Stars* is separated into three distinct sections: stars as constructed social phenomena, stars as commoditized images, and stars as reflective signs of cultural ideology, which together form Richard Dyer's star theory. While Dyer's book focuses solely on film idols, his star theory can easily be applied to the formation of pop, rock, and hip hop celebrities.

According to Dyer's star theory, "stars are seen as owing their existence solely to the machinery of production", (Dyer, 1998). The star is not a real figure, but rather a construction of materials and branding, creating an ideal image of a person. When applied to pop, rock and hip hop stars, the music industry constructs the star out of an array of different materials, i.e. advertisements, magazines, fashion, albums, gossip etc. Specific image-making items become symbolic of or synonymous with the star, such as Bono's trademark Emporio Armani sunglasses, Madonna's iconic cone bra from the 1990 Blonde Ambition tour, Taylor Swift's plentiful and ever tumultuous relationships among young-Hollywood, Wiz Khalifa's openness with marijuana use, Elvis's many sparkly jumpsuits, or even young Justin Bieber's signature hair-do.

Stars are also commoditized images, as Dyer's star theory states "stars are models for consumption...their fashions are to be copied, fads followed, sports pursued, and hobbies taken up", (Dyer, 1998). Stars' performances on stage, lifestyles, and patterns of consumption allow them to become categorized or "typed", which can then easily be replicated and consumed, with the quantity of consumption dependent upon the popularity of the "type" at hand. In the popular music industry, the "boy band" has posthumously become the most widely-known, popular "type", resulting in an almost assembly line-like mode of production, in order to create more of this ever-marketable star image. Thus, groups like N'SYNC, Backstreet Boys, 98 Degrees, New Kids on the Block, The Wanted, and One Direction start to look like perfect photocopies of one another.

Lastly, according to Richard Dyer, "stars articulate...historical specificities of class, gender, race, sexuality, subcultural formations, etc.", (Dyer, 1998). Therefore, stars embody prevalent preconceptions of cultural and historical ideology. Certain stars support dominant ideology by conforming to it, while

other stars confirm social hegemony by contradicting it. For instance, rap star, Macklemore contradicts dominant heterosexual, rap ideology. In his hit song, "Same Love", he includes the lyrics "when I was in the third grade, I thought that I was gay...I told this to my mom, with tears rushing down my face" and "if I was gay, I would think hip hop hates me", acknowledging that dominant ideology in society- especially among members of the rap/hip-hop community- is intolerance towards homosexuality.

Overall Dyer's writing is astoundingly captivating, a seemingly perfect mix of hard academia and film nostalgia, and the only drawback may be the slightly heavy focus on cultural perspective theory with minimal attention to viewer agency. According to one Amazon.com customer review, "the problem is that it [*Stars*] is openly full of Marxist and liberal comment that interferes with trying to get the star concepts across", (Shock Writer, 2013). The review continues on to discuss how Dyer's political diatribe, over the way in which stars enable hegemonic ideology, impedes the reader from taking away the most important elements from his proposed star theory. Despite its disputable, neo-Marxist one-sidedness, *Stars* is the premier work in celebrity studies, easily applicable to stardom in all mediums, and it is highly recommended to any student of media, music, or film studies.

-Lauren Levine

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