

GRAEME TURNER

popularisation —again!

ELLIS CASHMORE

Beckham

Polity, Cambridge, 2003

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CHARLES LEMERT

*Muhammed Ali: Trickster in the
Culture of Irony*

Polity, Cambridge, 2003

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RRP \$39.95 (pb)

Certain kinds of cultural studies writing have often sailed close to the wind of popular journalism. And the reverse is true as well. Much as journalists love to denigrate cultural studies as an academic field, cultural studies approaches and enthusiasms have often been taken up directly in the quality press's colour supplements, in the television diet of tabloid current affairs, and in the approach taken to popular entertainment or sport or celebrity. Engaged in a battle for cultural authority, competing for the right to explain contemporary culture to its chosen audience, cultural studies and cultural journalism seem to be getting closer together. Despite the familiar criticisms that cultural studies academics write incomprehensible prose only the cognoscenti can understand, much cultural studies writing actually reads like what the media tend to call 'cultural commentary'. Not only do the pitch and the content of the two modalities converge, but their audiences as well. Both the journalist and the cultural studies academic have (reluctantly, perhaps, but ultimately) accepted the responsibility of communicating their thoughts to the public: for the journalist, simply, their readers; for the cultural studies writer, the chimera of that mythical crossover from the academic to the trade market.

The danger for the cultural studies academic who wants to write for that crossover market is that they simply write high-end cultural journalism. This is particularly the case when writing about celebrity. Once, an anonymous reviewer of a book proposal told me that my plan of writing semiotic analyses of a series of iconic public individuals was really a waste of

time: 'the weekend colour magazines have done your work for you', she wrote. Among the consequences of this advice was that when Frances Bonner, David Marshall and I wrote our book about celebrity in Australia, *Fame Games*, we decided to focus on the production industry and simply not deal with individual celebrities at all. A doctrinaire position, perhaps, but Ellis Cashmore's book on David Beckham provides a clear demonstration of the pitfalls this helped us to avoid.

Part of a new series, *Celebrities*, published by Polity in the UK (the second book dealt with in this review, *Muhammed Ali*, is in this series too), *Beckham* deals with 'the icon, the celebrity, the commodity, the Beckham that exists independently of time and space and resides in the imaginations of countless acolytes'. (4) Cashmore presents an account of David Beckham's celebrity from a number of points of view: as a component of the branding of Manchester United, as a 'gay icon', as a new-age husband and father, and as the beneficiary of Victoria Beckham's skill with publicity. Along the way, Cashmore presents an interesting account of the political economy of the intersections between British football and Rupert Murdoch's media empire, the contrasting career trajectory of Paul Gascoigne, and the operation of the publicity and promotion industries that market such celebrity-commodities as David Beckham. Briskly written, aimed at a general reader with just a smattering of cultural studies terminology, this is a classic attempt at the crossover book. While it draws on cultural studies resources, it does so without much obvious academic paraphernalia, and with a breezy chatti-

ness that defuses any sense of catering to an elite reader.

The trouble is, I'm afraid, to do this seems to demand prose that is breathlessly hyperbolic and banal. At the end of the introductory chapter, for instance, we have this series of summative statements:

Beckham would simply not have happened in another era. He's perfect for today. In fact, I'll argue, he's as much part of the twenty-first cultural landscape as Bob the Builder or Tony Soprano. None of them would have happened any time else but the present. (13)

Sigh. How (or, indeed, why?) might one prove such a silly proposition? Well, in this case, Cashmore doesn't even try: he simply repeats the assertion and others like them throughout the book. What the reader winds up with is a really long colour supplement profile.

Just as my publisher's reader had warned, there is no need for us to do this kind of work. It is constantly being done, as we speak, in the weekend press, on weekend or late night television arts and culture shows looking to attract a hip younger viewer, and in radio magazine formats addressed towards understanding contemporary shifts in popular culture.

To be fair, there is some historical research informing the project, but again not of a depth that would clearly differentiate it from the approach likely to be taken by a journalist. The analysis of Beckham's appeal is historicised through the narrative of his football career and his relation with Posh Spice, eventually Victoria

Beckham. Such an approach provides us with more detail than we might normally expect at one sitting, but the level of analysis is incapable of doing much with this detail—other than simply laying it out for us. There is no doubt that Cashmore understands the current research on celebrity: there is plenty in the book which makes use of it, and which takes a position on it. However, he is unsuccessful at deploying it in such a way as to make it useful; too much of the book is spent in pursuit of the killer phrase or aphorism that will make his audience *understand*.

I had my doubts about Polity's *Celebrities* series from the start, I'd have to admit, and this book embodies the kind of problems I expected cultural studies to encounter in presenting breezy and accessible analyses of celebrities to a crossover audience. Simply, it becomes part of the thing it hopes to analyse. The second title in the series, Charles Lemert's *Muhammed Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony* does suggest slightly better things, however, and takes a significantly different approach. For a start, although the writing is also relentlessly personalised, albeit without the gushiness of Cashmore's, it reveals a stronger commitment to the usefulness of sustained historical research. Lemert shapes the history through the literary figure of 'the trickster', outlining Ali's particular genre of celebrity as a means of understanding the boxer's behaviour and cultural appeal. The provocations to such a reading are obvious enough. Ali's self-promoting behaviour as professional boxer certainly acted as a goad to much of the white audience and invested heavily in his own ability to carry it off—

not just as the public figure but as the elite sportsman.

This is the kind of reading one is used to in literary criticism, wheeling a central trope across a fictional field to see if it provides a convincing frame for thinking about the meanings and pleasures to be found in the text. For much of the time the trickster idea is exploited in Lemert's book it does seem to me just a little too arbitrary; as a conceit, it illuminates certain aspects of Ali's public appeal but it does detract from the wider historical battle in which his self-presentation participated. However, Lemert does make positive use of this conceit as a means of considering a particular dimension of celebrity: the celebrity as an aspirational figure, offering their audience an antidote to the ordinary, and operating in ways that are analogous to the spiritual or the religious.

What is more powerful and more valuable, though, is Lemert's location of Ali within the history of prominent Afro-American fighters from Jack Johnson onwards whose careers and historical significance are complexly overdetermined by the cultural politics of race in the USA. The central chapters of this book are overwhelmingly concerned with charting these politics, and reflecting upon them. This is the strongest component of the book, thoughtfully written, and rewarding to read. It is hard for Lemert to generate much new material for us here, however. As he points out, there is no written archive to delve in to and the media material available is extremely familiar to us through its re-presentation in many other locations—most compellingly, in Leon Gast's film *When We Were Kings* (1996). What this

produces, unfortunately, is Lemert's continual recourse to mythic parallels as a means of giving us a better sense of the historical contingency of Ali's reputation on the one hand, and his universalising cultural resonance on the other. Along the way, Ali is compared to a range of mythical or fictional heroes that takes us from Odysseus to Brer Rabbit. I would have to admit that there really is a limit to how illuminating such parallels can be, and this book does reach those limits from time to time. There are a few too many apocalyptic, universalising moves and they culminate in a final chapter that I found plain embarrassing in its proliferation of banal observations about celebrity, the body and death. At this point, the insistent sound of a book with not much left to tell us—the sound that dominates Cashmore's book—becomes painfully audible.

These two books are addressing a market that wants to read about celebrities but which is left undernourished by the kinds of treatment provided by the glossy monthlies and the weekend colour supplements. It seems like a reasonable idea to publish them, and to take a version of cultural studies approaches to this market. My concern is that not enough of what is valuable about cultural studies' approaches to

celebrity is employed (certainly not in *Beckham*), and that the historical consciousness that informs so much of Lemert's book is not more evident throughout both of them. I understand that this is a narrow line to tread—making books that are accessible as well as intellectually rich is easier said than done and the series editor, Anthony Elliott, faces a difficult task in pursuing these twin objectives. It is not impossible, though, nor is it a problem that is in any sense new. Indeed, many who work in cultural studies have embraced the challenge of popularisation and have managed to deal with it successfully over the years. On the evidence of these two books, however, Polity's *Celebrity* series could as easily participate in the trivialisation of cultural studies knowledges as in their popularisation.

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