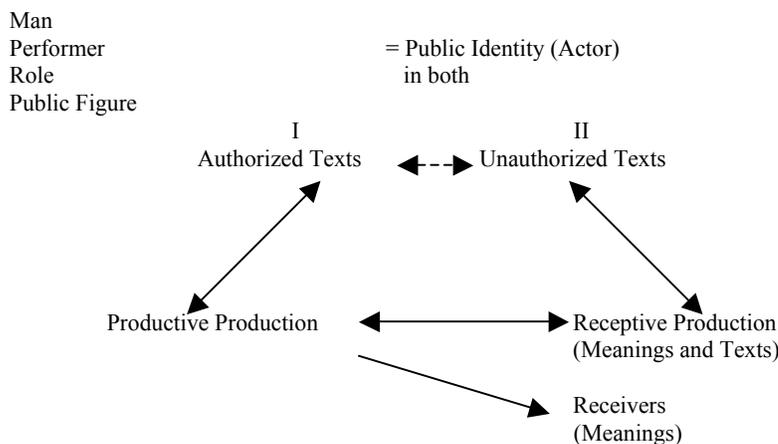


My Face is Never was – Shenja van der Graaf, MA thesis (May 1999)

Summary

In this study I explore how the Hollywood actor becomes a popular and public media figure. The thesis is that ‘the popular’ is constructed by three modes of production, namely, institutions, several types of audiences and the actor himself. The study is constructed into six chapters that successively deal with the ‘enigma of the popular’.

In chapter 1, *Enigma of the Popular Representation*, the theoretical framework that lies at the base of this thesis is provided by giving an overview of the study of popular culture according to Cultural Studies theory. ‘Popular’ means ‘belonging to the people’, while ‘culture’ is understood as a bearer of signs that express and give way to meanings which are crucial to our social system. Popular culture embeds power relations as well and as such refers on the one hand, to culture made by people for themselves and on the other hand, it refers to culture that is identified by others and not by the people themselves (Williams, 1976). This study offers an inquiry into the production of the Hollywood actor who nowadays literally ‘belongs to the people’ because he is a provider of other people’s entertainment. The popular actor is here understood as a popular phenomenon, as a collection of images and signs (Dyer, 1979) which lie at the base of the framework to understand the actor as a constructed entity produced by institutions and audience agencies: through the *visibility* of the actor – beyond meaning production, star and fan studies – I focus on his textual construction as one of the main marketing tools of the media industry which is given expression to in the question ‘how is the popular actor textually and culturally produced?’. The answer explores the production of the actor Keanu Reeves as a man, performer, character, commodity and public or media figure. Together they represent and articulate the actor’s public identity in various (inter-)texts. The actor’s ‘visibility’ then asks for a reconsideration of the mode of popular production. Thus, instead of focusing on meaning production based on the interaction between texts and audiences conform to various cultural studies theories I focus on the process of producing the popular actor in textual manifestations by the interaction of institutions, audiences and the actor himself. The following model shows the shift in theoretical framework:



The model shows that the actor is constructed in *authorized* and *unauthorized* texts. The former are produced by institutions (productive production) and the actor himself (actor as site), while the latter are produced by several types of audiences (receptive production). Especially, I sought to reconceptualize the actor as site (Dyer, 1979 and 1998; Fiske, 1987; DeCordova, 1990; Gledhill, 1991) and audiences as producers of meanings and texts (Jenkins, 1992; Cruz and Lewis, 1994; Nightingale, 1996). Thus, these three modes of production lead to on the one hand, a methodological shift in audience research and on the

other hand, they offer a (re-)conceptualization of the come about of the popular by various *textual producers*.

The chaptersⁱ two till five map several productive instruments in the creation of the popular actor. Chapter two, *Mapping Productive Instruments: Institutions*, and chapter three, *Authorized Discourse: Textual Manifestations of Institutional Agencies*, answer the questions ‘how do entertainment institutions produce texts?’ and ‘what texts do these institutions produce?’ Chapter two maps the mechanics of several branches of the media industry such as the roles played by talent agents, managers, producers, actors – with whom I had interviews with - rating systems, marketing strategies, record labels and other activities that construct and maintain the actor’s appeal and chapter three maps textual manifestations such as movies, magazines, merchandise and web sites, produced by the former.

Chapter four, *Mapping Productive Instruments: Audiences*, explores if and how audiences produce texts. It also deals with the difficulty of the concept ‘audience’ for the offered shift in methodology calls into question the conceptualization of ‘audiences’; especially, questions such as ‘how can you justify – as an academic – your selection of audiences?’ and ‘how diverse should and can audiences be?’ are dealt with. Like Hartley (1992) I emphasize that audiences are no organized entity, as a consequence I sought to study audiences that are ‘already there’. For instance, I found Keanu Reeves-related web sites, message boards and chat rooms; letters sent to magazines (and put in columns); Keanu’s manager handed me bags full of fan mail; I encountered fans at Dogstarⁱⁱ concerts in Los Angeles; I was invited to a fan convention in New Jersey; I talked to a teacher who taught a course on ‘the films of Keanu Reeves’; I interviewed an author of a Keanu-biography and encountered several artists who created art that is inspired by Keanu or resembles him in some ways. These textual manifestations are dealt with in chapter five, *Unauthorized Discourse: Textual Manifestations of Several Types of Audiences*.

The final chapter then, *Intersections: The Construction of the Public Representation in Overlapping Discourses*, discusses four case studies which give way to an understanding of the overlapping discourses of the three production modes. The first one deals with the rumor that Keanu Reeves was married to media mogul David Geffen. The study deals with the production of the rumor, its circulation within authorized and unauthorized discourses, its responses and its aftermath. The second study theorizes the common human interest in celebrities’ private lives through the concept ‘fantasy’. The third study focuses on fans who were confused when a message was posted at the ‘Dogstar Fan Bulletin Board’ signed by Keanu Reeves and the final case study focuses on the production, circulation and intertextuality of Keanu Reeves-quotations. These examples show the actor as a signifying process, as an instrument of meaning and text production and as such they offer a framework to study contemporary culture. The study of successful meaning and textual production then functions as an indicator for the ‘enigma of the popular’: it offers the opportunity to increase the predictability of potential audiences by improving audience studies and marketing strategies.

The thesis concludes with *Reconsidering Textual Producers*, in which the three modes of production and their manifestations are summarized. It also explores advantages and disadvantages of this approachⁱⁱⁱ in order to conceptualize the popular – such as problems related to the ‘actor’ who is ‘multileveled’ for he is both a private and public human being, consisting of assigned characteristics which make the productive mode ‘actor as site’ very diffuse, other difficulties are related to the term ‘audience’, ‘authorized’ and ‘unauthorized’ which call into question issues of authority, power, domination and subordination, and finally, the discrepancy between ‘performance’, ‘reality’, ‘authenticity’ and ‘identity’ are dealt with from a postmodern perspective. I conclude by referring to Keanu who said “it’s all multileveled – about why someone enjoys a certain actor or actress’ work. It’s entertainment, it’s escapism, it’s sexual, it’s political, it’s social, it’s human, it’s nature, it’s physical and it’s the films, it’s all of that together.” After finishing this study I can only add that it’s the interaction among entertainment institutions, several types of audiences and the actor that provide a framework to study the come about of the popular.

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A lot of the material used in the chapters can be found in the appendix.

Dogstar is the band in which Keanu Reeves plays bass guitar.

Other criticisms are expressed, for instance, with regard to several aspects of cultural studies theories but which often go beyond the content of this study.