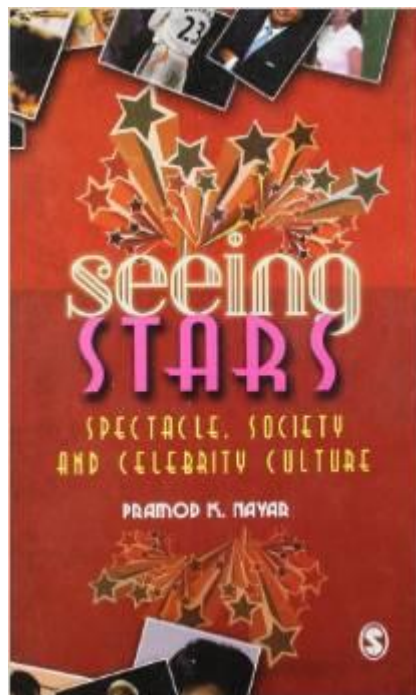


*SEEING STARS: Spectacle, Society and Celebrity*  
by Pramod K. Nayar, Sage Publications Ltd., 2009, 220 pp.  
ISBN: 9788178299075

Reviewed by Kooshna Gupta, M.A., Research Scholar

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### The Book

The book is a collage of events from the multi- facet celebrities' lives, which Pramod K. Nayar technically depicts with an analytical angle, based on theoretical knowledge and vivid examples. It is an umbrella of celebrities ranging from Bollywood, T.V, Hollywood, sportsman, industrialists, politics and so on. Each concept, from both sides of the coin (the audience and celebrities), is appropriately supported with quotations or theories of experts.

### The Author

Pramod K. Nayar teaches at the Department of English, University of Hyderabad, India. His areas of interests are "English colonial writing on India, Postcolonial Studies,

Travel Writing, Human Rights and Cultural Studies (including celebrity studies, digital culture studies and superheroes). .”<sup>1</sup> He is the author of a number of books, namely *Reading Culture: Theory, Praxis, Politics* (2006), *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cybertechnology* (2004), *Literary Theory Today* (2002), *English Writing and India, 1600–1920: Colonizing Aesthetics* (2008), *Postcolonial Literature: An Introduction* (2008), *The Great Uprising: India, 1857* (2007), *The Trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar* (2007) and many more. He is the editor of *The Penguin 1857 Reader*. His largest project to date, the 5-volume *Women in Colonial India: Historical Documents and Sources*, released in 2013.<sup>[2][3]</sup>



Pramod K. Nayar

Courtesy: <http://cis-india.org/digital-natives/media-coverage/an-experiment-in-social-engineering>

### Description of the Book

*Seeing Stars: Spectacle, Society and Celebrity* is a Sage Publications book, published in 2009. It has 220 pages, covering the preface, acknowledgements, five chapters, conclusion, bibliography, index and about the author respectively. Its reddish cover with partial snapshots of some celebrities from various fields is attractive and already we have the flavour of the book. “The style is informal and breezy, but the information is solid and in-depth, so it is accessible to readers beyond the purely academic. It offers interesting insights into an aspect of popular culture that is all around us and governs our lives in a hundred ways, yet we rarely give much thought to the phenomenon.” (*The New Indian Express*).<sup>4</sup>

## Critical Summary of the Book

The *Preface* summarises the book systematically, ultimately arousing the desire to go through the pages spontaneously. The book is “mostly wearing through many features and signs of the texts of celebrity culture” (p.viii), which Nayar describes a celebrity as “a Spectacle”. Thus, “celebrity culture produced, disseminated and consumed through global media is a truly global culture now.” (P.viii)

The writer pays gratitude to his professional contributors and personal acquaintances in his acknowledgement.

## Opening Chapter

The opening chapter, *Who wants to be a celebrity?*, starts by defining the term “celebrity”, the wide range of celebrity from various fields of professions, their portrayal by the media, the main agent of their publicity and their functions as well as their contributions in the society. The media plays a crucial role in the process of making a common man a popular one in the sense that in the way his work and achievements are projected.

This chapter mostly shows the development of a normal citizen towards a celebrity and the author gives an overall insight on the various types of celebrities. He also attributes the celebrity’s world as “celebrity ecology”, which includes five aspects, media constructions, spectacle, consumer culture, scandals and power. The rest of the book will be predominantly based on these features.

## The Second Chapter: The Star Is Born!

Eventually, in the second chapter, *A star is Born: Constructing Celebrity*, the author carries forward the term “celebrity ecology” in details and trace the route leading to become a celebrity, which he defines as “celebritisation”, consisting of two basis dimensions, firstly “constructing as individual as an object of desire” and secondly, “constructing an individual for mass consumption.”

Furthermore, the celebrity has an influential effect on both the financial and cultural economy, which symbolizes the intersection of the ecology of the celebrity. A celebrity is “the media’s validation, praise and reproduction of their achievement and looks.” (P.31) The

celebrity is also often considered as a commodity that can be “valuable, marketable and visible.” (p.32)

### **Celebrities**

Based on David Marshall (1997) “scheme of identification”, the writer classifies identifications of celebrities into three categories namely, auratic, sympathetic and associative. He adds mimetic identification to the list.

There is a detailed description on the functioning of media rituals and its interconnection between the celebrity’s media and the audience. “Media rituals can be of various types and formats” (P.36), namely contest, in and out notion, media sites, media events, celebrity locales, reality T.V. and self-disclosure. All these events are explained with a critical eye and supported with examples.

The audience has the tendency of following the trend of the celebrities, thus resulting in the consumer culture – celebrity culture linkages, through the medium of advertisements. “Product endorsements thus extend and expand the celebrity’s aura, just as consumer culture is central to the cult of the celebrity.” (P.60)

In consequences, the “celebrity bodies” are of great importance in projecting their wellness and fitness. Their physical personalities matter immensely “to the culture, [the] fan following and [the] consumption of the celebrity.” In the sense that “the body [... should] always [be] available to be viewed in its perfection.” On the other hand, the journalist is also gaining popularity by becoming “a recognisable face in the mass media” in certain cases. Thus, the reporter also shares the limelight “with the film star and politician.” (P.65)

This chapter gives a minute observation on various factors which contribute in building a celebrity from the scraps. It is well organised and proceed in a systematic way linking each idea beautifully, supported with vivid examples.

### **Third Chapter – The Celebrity as Spectacle**

In the third chapter, *Star Power: The Celebrity as Spectacle*, the writer follows Chris Rojek’s term of ‘celebrification’ in order to have a better understanding of “the production of a celebrity [...] to classify her or him as a spectacle that focuses as individual or collective desire.” (p.68). Indian celebrities are distinguished in two ways, either perpetual spectacle or

extended celebrification, both are the backbones of celebrity ecology. Moreover, “spectacle involves the production of something on screen and its consumption by the audience” (P.69).

The media act as a transformative agent in converting the celebrities into “viewable spectacles,” which is in fact the most vital aspect in rendering *celebritiness*.

The omnipresence of the celebrities is an aestheticisation to appeal as a spectacle, where the photograph is the epicentre. Fashion as well as taste does contribute in building consumer culture, “to attain social solidarity and recognition.” The encounter between the ordinary and the celebrity is also significant in the spectacle of celebrity.

Further light is thrown on the celebrities’ performance by differentiating it to be either spectacle or anti-spectacles. There is also the masquerade celebrity, which distinguishes between the fake and the counterfeit. The word “charisma” has long been linked to celebrity; a “symbiotic relationship” is built between the audience and the people.

This chapter can be indeed summarised as “the Spectacle of aestheticised, fashionable or charismatic celebrity performance generates special bonds with the audience, even when the performance is something unsavoury or which defies the acceptable norms of that culture.” (p.107)

#### **The Fourth Chapter – Celebrity and Scandal**

By the same token, the fourth chapter, *Star Spotting: Celebrity and Scandal*, embraces the interconnection between stars and wrongdoing, “where scandals often enhances the celebrity quotient of the star.” The audience is more attracted by the sensationalism of celebrities, where scandalous [one] are arguably a greater demand than ordinary celebrities in terms of media coverage.” Hence englobing the logic of celebrity culture where “the logic of secrecy (that is) our interest in their secrets” (p.114) is an important point.

The writer goes on elaborating on the structure of scandal, which usually “creates a culture of dialogue and discussion in the public sphere.” (p.115) In fact, a scandal is based on “the story, other than the news”, “human interest” and “morality and moral panics”. (p.125)

These celebrities are so much idealised, that a single mistake on their parts, is seen as a very big crime and spread like fire in the media. The writer emphasises that “celebrity culture’s ecology via mass media representation constructs the star as somebody above the

average human.” (p.126). He further adds “celebrity and damage” (p.140), where the celebrity is simultaneously the culprit as well as the victim. Thus, there is always a craze and curiosity in what the celebrity is doing, whether good or wrong, creating “a roaring industry in tabloid culture.” (p.141)

### **Fifth Chapter – Consuming Celebrity**

The fifth chapter, *With Stars in Our Eyes: Consuming Celebrity*, revolves around the audience’s consumption of such celebrities. The latter is considered blindly as the ultimate power, the audience rejoices and grieves along with them. The demonstrations of the fans following is unlimited ranging from the “sepia-tinted photographs of film and sport stars stuck inside autorickshaws and taxis. Stars calendars and glossy pin-ups for walls. Hand-waving, screaming crowds at celebrity stage shows”. (p.146)

Practically, “the audience is (merely) a consumer. It adds profits for the film industry, the TV serials, and the manufacturing industry.” (p.149) Consequently, the audience is “a commercial transaction.” With the rise in technological use, the media is now days building on interactive rapport between the celebrities and their fans. The writer illustrates the concept of fans, fandom and fan production as without a fan following community there will not be any celebrity. Both the celebrities and the audience accomplish each other for the media culture and consumption.

### **To Conclude**

To conclude, the author sums up by emphasising on the celebrity ecology along with its consumption and its omnipresence in the society. In addition, “the celebrity is situated at the intersection of numerous discourses [...] all of which are located within a structure of capitalist production and consumption.” (P 176) For this reason, the “celebrity management is a thriving business enterprise today” (P.177).

Besides, the contemporary trends of “cultural production [...] ensures that celebrity culture is the new cool of our lives.” Conclusively, the author ends the book with a humorous note, “so now: who wants to be a celebrity?”

The bibliography is an intensive reading collection of almost ten pages. This clearly illustrates the deep knowledge with which the writer has tactfully treated the subject based on established literary as well as real facts. As for the Index section, it includes 3 pages.

## Public Reviews about the Book

Various newspapers and institutions have given their critics on the book. The *Contributions to Indian Sociology* comments, “Nayar’s book on celebrity culture examines the processes through which celebrities are constructed and packaged as ‘consumer products’ [...] The analysis of celebrity culture in the book unravels changing conceptions of legitimacy, authority and credibility that are at work in Indian culture today...[The book] will be of great interest to students of consumption studies and consumer culture, media studies, celebrity studies, popular culture, and cultural studies, and Asian studies.”<sup>5</sup>

For the *Mail Today*, the book “has a resonance that goes beyond the academic sphere. It holds up a mirror to what we have become as a society.”<sup>5</sup> Over and above, *The Financial Express* describes it as “a rare study of celebrity and Page3 culture in India, [which] explores “celebrity ecology” in order to understand the processes that transform a celebrity into a “consumer product”.”<sup>5</sup>

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