

Introduction

“Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve and Talent”: *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and the Cultural Politics of Fame

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When the ceaselessly industrious RuPaul Charles eventually decides to write the next volume of his autobiography, the chapter devoted to the final year of the 2010s will no doubt be narrated as the point at which his triumph as an international media personality was assured; Photographed by Annie Leibovitz for *Vogue* (an outlet where RuPaul is now routinely a topic for fashion and beauty features) the launch of his own daytime talk show, *The RuPaul Show* on the Fox Network, a comedy series, *AJ and the Queen*, commissioned by Netflix, a make-up line with Mally Cosmetics and in 2018 perhaps the most symbolically significant of all, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. All of these developments transpire alongside the launch of season 11 of *RuPaul’s Drag Race*, the associated DragCon events, the *Werq the World* drag tour and the internationalization of the TV franchise with versions launching in Australia and Canada as well as the surprise success of *RuPaul’s Drag Race UK*. RuPaul and the polished, glossy vision of drag that he embodies has been a resounding international success. The pillar product in RuPaul’s empire remains, for the time being at least, the reality TV competition show *RuPaul’s Drag Race* a show designed as a campy satire of *America’s Next Top Model* conceived as the search for ‘America’s next drag superstar’ predicated on the premise that the ultimate dream of any aspiring drag queen must inevitably be the attainment of celebrity status, indeed that fame is the sine qua non measure of success.

As editors of this special edition we all agreed that the particularities of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a format, organized around the star power of its eponymous host and its roster of celebrity judges and memorable contestants to its conditions of distribution and consumption provide extravagant riches from which we can mine an understanding about the workings of celebrity across media platforms in the 21st century.

The international appeal of *RuPaul's Drag Race* that reaches far beyond its cable and pay-per-view audience on channels such as LogoTV and VH1 has fostered a passionate and invested audience base which in turn has resulted in a growing body of work around the Drag Race phenomenon and drag culture more broadly in the past 5 years. For instance, in 2017 David Gudelunas and Niall Patrick Brennan's substantial edited collection *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture : The Boundaries of Reality TV* described the parameters of debate within this nascent subdiscipline. We note though that the connections between this specific iteration of drag culture and contemporary celebrity culture have until now been implicitly drawn rather than explicitly explored.

This then is a special edition of *Celebrity Studies* that aims to do two things simultaneously; to point to the textual and cultural specifics of *RuPaul's Drag Race* as an internationally popular phenomenon and consider the ways in which the show can be regarded as an instructive vehicle to explore a set of debates around contemporary celebrity; questions of gender and sexuality, the use of social media in framing and promulgating fame, the relations between mainstream and marginal celebrity status, fandom and fan practices, and the discourses of celebrity connected as they so often are to enactments of gendered glamour as well as histories of personal adversity, pain and trauma.

We have tried in this special edition to present essays that explore the intersections of celebrity and drag culture as it is represented in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and we have therefore aimed to gather together essays with a diversity of voices, perspectives, objects of study and concerns. It was also important to

complicate easy assumptions about the assumed majority gay male audience and their investments in the programme and we are delighted that so many of our authors are female as *RuPaul's Drag Race* provides a space to consider performances of gender and identity that are not confined to expressions of gay male sexuality alone. We also felt very keenly that given the importance of fandom, communality and the pleasures of sharing that are central to the success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* that it was important not only to include essays that celebrate as well as criticize RuPaul's vision of drag culture but also that so many of the essays in this collection are co-authored.

We open this special edition with an essay by Jamie Hakim and Zeena Feldman, 'From Paris is Burning to #dragrace: Social Media and the Celebification of Drag Culture' that contextualizes and situates many of the debates that follow on in subsequent chapters. This includes the so-called mainstreaming of drag culture, the use of social media as a mechanism for self-promotion and self-branding and a critique of the politics that implicitly and explicitly undergird the discourses of *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

In 'Assume the position: two queens stand before me': RuPaul as Ultimate Queen' Hazel Collie and Gemma Commane tackle the connections between the matrilineal discourse of RuPaul as 'Mama Ru' and the promotion and commodification of RuPaul as a brand head on. The authors argue that we should understand RuPaul as the 'ultimate queen' rather than as Mama Ru and therefore as the epitome of this very particular iteration of contemporary drag culture.

As *RuPaul's Drag Race* has evolved from season to season and grown in popularity it's possible to argue that the show's satirical intentions have been superseded by the therapeutic discourses of transformation and self-realization that RuPaul extols in the publication of the self-help manual *GuRu* for instance. However campy satire remains a pervasive element of the programme's style and format and this is a subject that Hannah Andrews addresses. In 'Drag celebrity impersonation as queer caricature in The Snatch Game' Andrews discusses the interplay between the transgressive and the subversive and the

reactionary and the conservative that is dramatized through the mainstreaming of drag in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. By focusing on one of the most popular challenges that are staples of the show's format, the 'Snatch Game', Andrews point to the potential that the caricature of celebrities offers as a camp strategy. As she observes, "if camp can be defined as 'queer parody' drag impersonations may be looked at as queer caricature."

Fandom and fan investment has been one of the distinguishing characteristics and core to the reception and circulation of the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise. We felt therefore that an essay grounded in an appreciation of at least one of the queens was an essential contribution in terms of representing current drag culture scholarship. Renee Middlemost's essay 'Rewriting 'Herstory': Sasha Velour's Drag as Art and Activism' wittily uses the *RDPR* 'virtues' (charisma, uniqueness, nerve and talent) to conduct a star study of one of the most distinctive winners of the drag race crown, Sasha Velour.

Rachel O'Connell also focuses on a specific queen but with altogether different intentions. In "'Labouring in the Image": Celebrity, Femininity, and the Fully Commodified Self in the Drag of Willam Belli' O'Connell discusses the self-proclaimed 'bad girl' of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, Willam. As a queen whose persona and signification resisted the constraining discourses of the programme, O'Connell sees Willam's drag femininity as one that is fixated with the acquisition of fame and also crucially about labour ('werk' being the fundamental injunction that RuPaul makes to her girls.) and considers the extent to which this can be understood as a comment on the construction of contemporary femininity in the digital age.

In "'No One is Trash, No One is Garbage, No One is Cancelled': The Cultural Politics of Trauma, Recovery and Rage in *RuPaul's Drag Race*' Deborah Ferreday also focuses on a divisive queen through an exploration of The Vixen who courted controversy and suffered a fan backlash by questioning the racial politics of her fellow contestants and the programme more broadly. Ferreday's essay which breaks new ground in the field of celebrity studies, sees The Vixen's post *RPDR* celebrity via social media as illustrative of the ways in which trauma,

rage and pain can be enacted (tropes central to the persona of the reality TV star). These performative acts Ferreday argues, resonate with a queer politics of vulnerability.

The final essay in this special edition returns to the issues that Hakim and Feldman set up in their opening essay and like Ferreday's essay points to the ways in which aspects of social media use deployed by the queens of *RuPaul's Drag Race* can be seen as indicative of the contemporary context of celebrity. Exploiting social media has been core to the success of the programme and to the development of the careers of the queens before and after they have appeared on *RuPaul's Drag Race*. John Mercer and Charlie Sarson's essay '15 Seconds of Fame: Rupaul's Drag Race, Camp, and 'Memeability'' considers one aspect of the ways in which celebrity status is articulated in the social media age; the meme and 'memeability' and the extent to which the textual specifics of social media have become integral to the construction of a celebrity persona in the 21st century.