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Changing understandings of fame in SA weekly magazines over the 20th century: from Huisgenoot to Heat

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Abstract

From the latter half of the 20th century onwards, we have witnessed what seems to be a growing contemplation of scandal and troubled inner lives in weekly magazine coverage of famous people, in South Africa and elsewhere. This marks a departure from earlier understandings of fame and indicates that there has been a shift in what makes a person worthy of representation in these magazines. This thesis takes the form of an exploration of the changes in what might be called 'representation-worthiness' in magazine titles in South Africa from the early 1900s to approximately 2010. It begins with an examination of the early editions of a traditional Afrikaans family magazine entitled *Huisgenoot (*which translates as something like 'home companion') and ends with an exploration of the gossip title *heat South Africa*. Rather than as historical in the full sense of the term, this research is better described as intentionally schematic. It centres on changes in the form of coverage of famous people and argues, primarily through textual evidence, that it is possible to trace identifiable shifts in what makes people worthy of being represented during different periods and in different South African magazine titles. By way of a consideration of who is covered, for what attributes and, as important, in what way, it argues for a trajectory moving from a focus on heroic figures in what is characterised as the epic tradition to those identifiable as Stars, and, finally, to those now widely described as Celebrities. The focus, in other words, is on the different figures that appear in South African magazines and the changing style of the coverage they receive, while relating these shifts to those in the local socio-political arena and, subsequently, to international changes visible in the global media. The thesis argues that while it was possible to identify and describe the implicit understandings of fame that informed the South African coverage from the early 1900s to the early 2000s, a characteristic figure can no longer be identified as we move towards the middle of the new millennium. It is suggested in the final chapter that what is found instead are hybrid figures drawing on some combination of the features of Heroes, Stars and Celebrities at the same time as the return of (almost) pure versions of these categories dispersed in and between different titles. A short concluding section reflects on the difficulty of explaining the emergence and prevalence of the Celebrity figure in particular, both in South Africa and internationally. This concluding reflection then attempts to locate this change in Michel Foucault's theory that we live in a 'Disciplinary society', which exercises power through a variety of closed institutions ranging from schools to psychiatric wards, and in particular his observation that the shift to Disciplinary Power has signalled a

change from ‘ascending’ to ‘descending’ individualisation, a term that in essence describes how society marks us as individuals.