

Where is the sacred in online celebrity? Praise, loath and physical interaction with Italian webstars *

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This paper aims to investigate how the online proximity between internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical settings, through a multi-sited ethnography that explores fan-star interaction in offline events where Italian webstars participate. Events where fans meet celebrities are among the most relevant media rituals (Couldry, 2003) where the celebrity status is reproduced, particularly through the definition of specific rules of interaction that mark the exceptionality of the famous person. However, in the social media landscape, the interaction with celebrities – especially with internet born stars – shifts from being relegated to rarity or para-sociality, to be a more frequent possibility of multisocial interaction (Hills, 2015). This increased potential for interaction doesn't necessarily correspond to an undermining of the symbolic distance between audiences and highly visible people. In the case of Italian webstars, for example, such passage from scarcity to abundance of presence have produced two very different scenarios: on the one hand we have social media stars that cultivate a deep intimacy with their fans, and are therefore requested to perform friendship, closeness and equality; on the other hand we find “trash stars”, people famous because they are ridiculed or ironically praised by networked publics, who are demanded to perform a stylized “memetic” version of themselves. By examining twelve occasions where Italian webstars participate in parties, book signing events and meet-and-greet events, this study will try to show 1) the existence of two distinct types of proximity with social media celebrities: one that is “fast”, bounded to the event and interested in preserving the idol's exceptionality, and one that is “extended”, repeated in time and aimed at an emotional and physical intimacy, 2) how this encounters can be regarded as instances of the “bio-economic sacred” (Mellor & Shilling, 2014), which is affectively stronger in extended proximity but formally more present in fast proximity.

Keywords: Internet celebrity; Media rituals; Fan/celebrity encounter; sacred; Italian celebrities

Introduction: a new fan/celebrity proxemics?

Between April and May 2017, a new fad spread in the world of Italian young social media celebrities: male webstars¹ kissing their teen and pre-teen fans on the lips.² Such acts immediately aroused widespread indignation among commentators of the Italian YouTube-sphere,³ as well as attempts by some rising youtubers to replicate the controversial but attention-grabbing behaviour. What spurred the “older” youtubers' outrage was not just the fact that very young fans were involved, and (allegedly) randomly met, but also the opportunistic effort of these webstars to publish videos and photos of such acts on their

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profiles, as a strategy to allure their audiences by promising the not-so-rare possibility of a personal - even sensual - contact with them.

Stars kissing fans as part of their performing routines is not of course a new phenomenon, especially if we look at pop and rock music stardoms. Many pop stars like Madonna, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry and Demi Lovato, among others, incorporated a “kissing a fan on stage” moment in their concerts.

In these cases, however, the exceptionality of such behaviours is orchestrated within the festive, excessive and exclusive frame of the performance or of the television appearance. When it comes to the Italian webstars case, such acts take place in apparently regular and mundane situations, in city streets, malls and squares, without an explicit moratorium bounded by the party situation or by the televisual arena.

Here we witness not just another step towards ordinariness in the communicative register of the stars, but what looks like a redefinition of fan-celebrity interaction rituals.

Certainly, these few cases are not necessarily representative of a general global trend within celebrity culture and need to be localized both at the level of the increasingly fluid and decentred system of representation of celebrity (Giles, 2018) and within the proxemics rules specific of the Italian culture.

Nevertheless, they suggest the existence of a code of the fan-celebrity interaction, where the physical contact with the stars is less and less similar to the exceptional encounter with the sacred icon and becomes a regular part of a work on the audience that includes physical, affective, and to certain extends, erotic labour.

If, as Chris Rojek (2004) stated, social distance, not just visibility, is the necessary condition of celebrity, should we abandon the use of this category in such cases or should we abandon the previous one as a necessary condition? Where is the sacred to desecrate when the difference between star and fans becomes more quantitative than categorical?

This paper tries to attempt an answer to the question “what remains of the sacred in online celebrity?”, by investigating how the online proximity between internet celebrities and their audiences is translated in physical-offline settings, especially in events where Italian webstars participate, like meet and greets, book signing events and club appearances.

Through a multi-sited ethnographic observation, the research examined what kind of social distance is staged in these events, trying to answer a second, more theoretical set of questions: “what kind of ritual is produced in these contexts?” and “which distinctions command the symbolic action of the fan-webstar encounter?”.

Celebrity and the sacred

To employ the category of the “sacred” in relation to the study of celebrity is certainly an operation that asks for some preliminary clarifications. That of the sacred is notoriously a slippery concept, whose definition does not meet unanimous consensus and provokes

frequent misunderstandings, especially when it comes to its relation to religious phenomena.

Much sociological work rooted in the Durkheimian tradition, especially within cultural sociology (Alexander 2005), has aptly worked to dispel the misleading overlap between “the sacred” and “the religious”. By framing sacrality as “a particular form of cultural signification in which symbols, objects, sentiments and practices are experienced as expressions of a normative, absolute reality” (Lynch, 2012, p.15), this approach has underlined the culturally constructed and historically contingent nature of the sacred, and therefore its persistence within secularized societies. The sacred, according to Mellor and Shilling (2014), manifests even in consumer culture – in what they define as a “bio economic modality” – as a “proliferation of re-enchantment options available to individuals and groups within a broad, socially differentiated market” (Mellor & Shilling, p.35).

Both the para-religious semantics and the reference to the sacred – and their confusion thereafter – have been a recurring theme in commentaries on stars (Burr 2013; Lawrence, 2009) and within the field celebrity studies. Such use can be traced since the pioneering remarks of Barthes (1957) on the “divinity” of Greta Garbo’s Face and Morin’s (1957) on the “modern pantheon” of Hollywood stars; in the numerous parallels traced between religious and secular idols worship (Braudy, 1986; Laderman, 2010; Maltby, Houran, Lange, Ashe, & McCutcheon, 2002; Rojek, 2004; Ward, 2011);⁴ in resorting to concept like iconicity and charisma in relation to celebrities social meaning (Alexander 2010, Lofton 2011, Hackley & Hackley 2016); but also in Couldry’s (2003) post-durkheimian approach to media ritual, where the categorical distinction between the sacred and the profane is used to read the legitimization of media power through the naturalized distinctions between ordinary and media world.

However, since the first works on the topic, and most notably in Morin’s *Les Stars* (1957), the relationship between celebrity and sacred is often framed in a peculiar paradox: on the one hand, stars are seen as forms of *immanent sacred*; they, so to speak, follow the typically modern passage from a transcendent sacred that creates heteronomy, to a interiorized sacred the creates autonomy (Seligman, Weller, Puett, Simon, 2008). On the other hand, the same analysis, tend to trace a trajectory towards the mundanization of stars, as if the very process of celebrification, putting the person in place of the myth, is destined to expose its arbitrariness and therefore to dispel it.

Celebrity thus seems to work in the manner of pharmakon for the sacred: it makes it persist against secularization, but on the condition of making it vulnerable to its disappearance.

On this scenario, internet and social media have been seen as accelerating factors on the development of the de-sacralization of celebrity, and mainly along three trajectories: *proximization*, *vilification* and *networked-commodification*.

Under the category of proximization lie all those processes that foster an incremental symmetry between fan and stars. Such trends concern both processes that were in place before the expansion of social media – like the democratization of celebrity (Driessens, 2015) and the increasing use in the celebrities’ communicative registers of traits of ordinariness, genuineness and mediocrity (Turner, 2010) – and processes galvanised

mostly by the multiplication of interaction possibilities afforded by digital media. Such dynamics attracted the attention of an increasing scholarship in recent years that tried to overcome “para-sociality” (Giles, 2000; Hartmann & Goldhoorn, 2011; Horton & Wohl, 1956) as a totalizing category of the fan-celebrity relationship, advancing concepts like “multisocial-interaction” (Hills, 2015) and “perceived interconnectedness” (Abidin, 2015). While some studies question the fact that social media are really enabling a more symmetrical communication between fans and celebrities (Kehrberg, 2015; Rihl & Wegener, 2017; Stever & Lawson, 2013), others have emphasized the existence and the significance of this interaction (Bennett, 2014; Giles, 2018).

The vilification trajectory concerns the growing influence that affects of aversion, derision and disgust have in the construction of fame in digital environments. This can be traced in the way social media afford to coordinate and make visible the work of anti-fandoms (Harman & Jones, 2013), but also in the emergence of anti-celebrities whose fame stems primarily from mockery (Gamson, 2011), like in the case of Italian trash stars (Brilli, 2016; Brilli 2017).

The trajectory of participatory commodification regards those developments that allow a possible coexistence between an explicit commercial strategy by the internet celebrity and its capacity to be perceived as authentic by its following, insofar as fans welcome and feel responsible for the person’s success and economic gain. For young fans of influencers and social media celebrities, authenticity and commodification aren’t necessarily opposed in a strict sacred/proface kind of polarity (Andò, 2016; García-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes, 2017), due to the networked reflexivity (Boccia Artieri, 2012) regarding the fame acquisition dynamics (Cocker & Cronin, 2017) and the normalization of self-entrepreneurialism and visibility labour discourses within the influencer industry (Abidin 2016; Duffy 2017; Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017).

The question that persist, however, is whether these trajectories constitute factors that undermine the social distance with- and the special status of internet celebrities, or ways to reproduce them through the illusion of a qualitative difference becoming a quantitative one.

Fans-celebrities encounters: media rituals and beyond

Fan-celebrities encounters represent special sites to test the transformations of established semantics and proxemics that structure celebrity culture. These are occasions where norms and codes of interaction that regulate the contact between the ordinary and the celebrity world are ritually performed (Couldry, 2003) and therefore made partially visible.

A notable body of work in this field focuses on aggressive and pathological behaviour towards public figures (Meloy, Hoffmann & Sheridan, 2008), or on the “situational impropriety” produced in unstaged individual encounter with a celebrity (Ferris & Harris, 2010). Pre-staged public appearances, however, like meets-and-greets and autographs

signing events, also provides a valuable and more practicable setting to observe fan-celebrity interaction rituals. As Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland & Boross (2014) state “meet-and-greets are ritualized meetings in which the contradictions between celebrities and ‘normal people’ are staged and temporarily bridged by the application of an established protocol” (Reijnders, Spijkers, Roeland & Boross, 2014, p. 153). As every liminal space or situation, the existence of such “temporary bridges” raises the question of the relationship between the ritualized behaviour, that keeps the liminal space in place, and the status of the symbolic boundaries on which the situation is build. Is the ritualized act of traversing those boundaries an anti-structural force that expose their arbitrariness or, instead, a way to recognize and reify their existence?

While Nick Couldry’s study of media rituals tends to frame such occasion as performative reproduction of the categorical separation between media people and ordinary people (Couldry, 2003), other studies have highlighted a more multifaceted set of meanings involved in these cultural performances. In their study of meets-and-greets with Dutch singer Marco Borsato, Reijnders et al. (2014) emphasized how, alongside the confirmation of the star-status, such occasions also work for the fans to establish themselves as a fan community and to experience a deep emotional – almost thaumaturgical – connection with their idol that help them facing personal sickness, losses and traumas.

Looking at the Italian context, the last 4 years have seen an exponential growth of organized meetings with webstars, both in quantity and in types. It is fair to say that the physical setting has become one among the crucial spaces where these celebrities exercise their cross-platform influence (Abidin, 2018). In this sense, not only is internet celebrity becoming less platform-bounded that it used to be (such in the YouTube-youtuber relationship); it is also the notion of a fame specific to the online world that is declining, in favor of a close interaction between online and offline celebrity performances.

When dealing with Italian webstars, we can distinguish six groups of fan-star event, which can be positioned along a continuum that goes from the *praxis* side to the *poiesis* side, that is from events where the webstar’s action is centred on its being-there, to events where the webstar’s action revolves around the production of a detached performance or content.

Meet-and-greets are among the most typical and diffused fan-celebrity encounters and also the closest to the *praxis* side, since the webstar’s presence is the sole centre of the event. Moving towards the *poiesis* side there are the occasions where limited groups of fans take part to the webstar everyday activity, like in the case of Lasabrigamer doing gymnastics with a group of young fans. Around the middle of the continuum there is the guesing in clubs and parties, which usually comprise a certain degree of entertaining routine. Closer to the *poiesis* side there are the book signing events, since in such occasion the work (allegedly) produced by the webstar is made visible in book-form. At highest level of *poiesis* there are those cases where the webstar perform an offline translation of its online contents, like vloggers doing stand-up routines and gamers live playing in front a fan-audience in theatres.⁵ Between the two poles we find a new emerging form of webstars-centred events; these usually take place in concert venues,

where the webstars are called to play the role of entertainers, doing sketch comedy, challenges and singing songs, even if these are not their main specialities. *Webstar Mania*,⁶ *Doubletap Tour*,⁷ *Beautiful Festival*⁸ and *Made in Internet*⁹ are among the most successful ones. One of the unique features of these events is the fact that they are constructed as “webstars festivals” that gather multiple young idols on stage. Moreover, they are aimed at providing both entertainment for the young fans and reassurance for parents that accompany them. As we read in the description of *Made in Internet*:

Made in Internet, the only show dedicated to fans of webstars, is a unique and unrepeatably show with challenges and live performances, which will see on the stage the most beloved group of gamers with the backing soundtrack of DJ Klaus. A truly unforgettable experience for fans, where *the distance imposed by screens will be eliminated*.¹⁰

Since its presentation, events like *Made in Internet* clearly manifest a paradoxical relationship with the symbolic boundary between fans and celebrities: on the one hand they are advertised as occasions where a more symmetrical interaction with fans can take place; on the other hand, however, they sanction an “A-list” of internet celebrities, by using the trope of the concert as a suggestion of the proximity between the webstars on stage and more mature media arenas.

Method

The observations here presented are part of an ongoing research project that employs multi-sited ethnography to examine how fan encounters with young Italian internet celebrities take place in both physical and online settings (Pink et al., 2016). The study considers such encounters through the framework of a digitally-mediated liveness (Gemini, 2016), where the event resides not just in the ephemeral *hic et nunc*, but in the interconnection between direct experience and multiple fragments documentation.

Since no previous studies on fan-celebrities staged encounters (Ferris & Harris, 2010; Raphael & Lam, 2018; Reijnders et al., 2014; Reijnders & Xu, 2018; Wagemakers & Dhaenens, 2015) have examined meetings with internet celebrities and none have been conducted in the Italian context, this research follows an exploratory aim.

More specifically the study combines participant observation at the events,¹¹ interviews with young fans, their parents, the events hosts and organisers, and analysis of online contents produced in relation to the events, during the anticipation phase (promotional material, teaser videos), throughout the event (photos and real time streamings) and after the event (vlogs and reports).

Here, however, I will concentrate on the data gathered through the participant observation, focusing on the spatial arrangement of the encounters, on how the interaction with the star is managed and on the sequence of actions that take place on stage and within the audience.

In order to take into account how different version of internet celebrity might influence the style of interaction, and therefore the kinds of ritualized action observable, I examined the two more distinguishable type of Italian internet celebrities that participate in offline encounters: canonical webstars and trash stars.

By canonical webstar I mean young Italian youtubers, instagrammers and tiktokers, admired by a core fan base of pre-teens and teens with an age ranging between 8 and 16, that establish a relationship of intimacy and mediated friendship with their followers, and that are supported by professional talent agencies.

“Trash star”, instead, is the name acquired in the Italian social media environment by those internet personalities who become famous because they are ridiculed or ironically revered online (Brilli, 2016; Brilli 2017), but that nonetheless have been able to reach the status of being paid to participate in offline events.

Overall, I attended 12 events, 7 with canonical webstars and 5 with trash stars,¹² as detailed in the following table.

Table 1 - Details of the events analysed through participant observation

Event	Date and venue	Type of celebrity	Type of event
Bello Figo	February 25 th , 2015, <i>Miami Club</i> , Monsano (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Andrea Diprè	April 5 th , 2015, <i>Sui Club</i> , Ancona (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Andrea Alongi	December 3 rd , 2016, <i>Mamamia</i> , Senigallia (AN)	Trash star	Club party
Marco Morrone	June 28 th , 2017, <i>L'Ombelico</i> , Latina (LT)	Trash star	Club party
Bello Figo	September 9 th , 2017, <i>Mu</i> , Parma (PR)	Trash star	Club party
Luciano Spinelli	June 10 th 2017, <i>Mondadori Megastore</i> , Bologna (BO)	Webstar	Book signing event
Sabrigamer	July 9 th , 2017, <i>Polo Est 3.0</i> , Igea Marina (RN)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Martina Francia	May 20 th , 2018, <i>Ipersimply</i> , Senigallia (AN)	Webstar	Book signing event
Kessy & Mely	June 11 th , 2018, <i>CC Auchan</i> , Ancona (AN)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Made in Internet (Mates and Favij)	April 15 th , 2018, <i>Estragon Club</i> , Bologna (BO)	Webstar	Spectacle/performance
Me Contro Te	June 16 th , 2018, <i>Piazza Andrea Costa</i> , Cesenatico (FC)	Webstar	Meet & Greet
Doubletap Tour Final	September 23 rd , <i>Fabrique</i> , Milano (MI)	Webstar	Spectacle/performance

For practical reasons most of the events were chosen by opportunity sampling among those that took place in the Centre-North of Italy (where I live). Nonetheless the sample includes many of the most famous Italian webstars, as well as two of the biggest events of this kind organized in Italy (*Made in Internet* and *Doubletap Tour Final*).

Encountering the webstar: performing availability, intimacy and mediocrity

In the analysed events, as far as the spatial structure is concerned, we note that the places designated to host the encounters are mainly commercial stores and squares. Most of the time the arrangement of the stage doesn't impose a strict frontality to fans; they can move around the temporary stage – and sometimes even look at the backstage, leave the space and return to it, engage with the other fans and with their parents. The events are not insulated from mundane reality; people going shopping or conducting other everyday activities usually pass nearby and mesh with the audience.

Obviously, the security and the bounding of the audience is still carefully curated, with bouncers, crush barriers and personnel for the emergencies. However, as one of the security personnel admitted, “these are very quiet events, very easy to handle, without crazy exalted actions to date, since girls and boys are already disciplined by the parents' gaze”.

The design of the encounters reflects on many levels the value of availability and reciprocity set forth by the webstars.

First, meets-and-greets and book signing are usually free events, where everybody – even adults – can participate to cheer the webstar. The custom of having to buy the book or other merchandising to access the area, which was the norm in the first phase of webstars meet-and-greets, it is now steadily decreasing. Sometimes the star is not even in an elevated position on a stage, but at a very close distance with the audience. When a stage is involved, we always find many attempts through which it is profaned and made unexceptional by letting casual fans and parents getting on it and interact with the host.

When some exclusivity is performed, it often appears to be a very “inclusive exclusivity”. In one event, the one with the TikToker Martina Francia, she recorded a special musically on her profile with one among the audience; the chosen one was one was not the first, but the last girl arrived.

This Christological inversion reflects the golden rule of the meet & greet: the webstars cannot leave until every present fan has been cheered, may the audience be made of 50 people or 2000.

The temporal sequence of the events is generally standardized. First, the event is introduced by electropop music played by a DJ or from a track-list, preparing the joyful atmosphere several minutes before the arrival of the star. Then is the turn of the presenter that starts to heat the audience about half an hour before the beginning. The emotional climax is reached when the webstar appears, usually walking into his area by the same route that the fans will traverse. Next there is some brief entertaining routine between the host and the webstar, usually performed casually and without any planned script.

In events like the *Made in Internet* the performance part is the central one; but even if carefully designed and supported rich lighting, videos and music, such performances maintain an informal and amateurish allure, to the point the many parents are surprised by lack of any attempt to mask the mediocrity of the performers.

Later starts the sequence of meet and greets and photo making. Here is where the actual interaction happens and where the proxemic code of the relation can be observed.

The performed closeness and bodily intimacy of these contacts is constant among all the webstars events. The star, passionately embrace the fan, kiss her on the cheek, ask her how she is doing, signs her body and cheerfully accept the gifts, in a routine that has to be replicated hundreds, if not thousands of times, within a single event.

This closeness aims to work both ways; the most valuable goal lies not just in passively receiving the star touch, but in accessing a reciprocal dimension where the star recognize and acknowledge the fan. Sometimes this is an actual possibility fostered by the previous online interaction, especially through Instagram stories, directs and streams. But mostly it becomes part of a performed sense of surprise that follows another rule that clearly emerges in the encounters: the webstar always have to show himself as a needing subject. Lasabrigamer, for example, came up with an ingenious way to mediate between performing neediness and the risk of misguided fan behaviours, like buying expensive gifts to the star: she asks fans to bring her very unremarkable objects like toilet paper rolls or toothpaste tubes.

The more the stars are in an early stage of their rise to fame and more they have to work on the stage physically. If the average time of the encounter for the most famous webstars is between 20 and 30 seconds for each fan, with the new one, especially with the webstars that came out of TikTok, the routine can extends up to four minutes. Among the observed cases, that of Kessy and Mely (who are recognized mostly as tiktokers) is the most elaborate one. The encounter includes the usual embrace, an Instagram story that is uploaded on their profile, the book signing, another embrace, the official photo and a musically performed together on the fan profile. It is not just the star the leave a trace on the fan, but also the other way around.

Here the parents' perspective is particularly telling. A common observation they make is that, they don't really understand the phenomenon or why their kids follow people that from their point of view, do next to nothing. But at the same time, they are not concerned since they see these personalities as clean and safe models. Apart from the sheer boredom that they experience, they don't regret accompanying them, it is an occasion to be assured of the non-threatening character of the phenomenon, and for their daughters and sons to meet their idols halfway on a common ground, without what they see as the "magnifying effect of the screen". As one of them stated:

To me these are occasions where they can witness that they are nothing special. I like *how clumsy and awkward they appear on stage*, because in this way they can *question their idols*. In fact, in my experience, after I bring her to event like this, the passion with that particular character kind of *fade*. But then there is another one immediately after. (R., 48, Made in internet, Bologna)

Overall, these features show a certain homogeneity between the encounters. This also due to the role of promotion agencies in producing a shared standard that facilitates the selling of these events. Since the publicity phase, such occasions are presented as ways to decrease the social distance with the star. On the one hand, several aspects like the extended physical contact with fans, the confusion between the ordinary and the extraordinary space and the performed reciprocity, are all features that seems to weaken

such distance. On the other hand, however, these also the first occasions where very young digital stars are introduced through the ritual framing of the fan-star encounter, making them occupy (and negotiate) the subject-position of the traditional celebrity.

Meeting the trash stars: the return of the aura (by ironic means)

The encounters with the trash stars show a different proxemic order from the intimate interactional style observed with the webstars. In the last decade, the label “trash star” has come to identify those people who become famous because ridiculed or ironically praised by networked publics. They constitute a peculiar kind of internet celebrities, considered halfway between freaks to be observed and commiserated, fools to be mocked and humiliated, and icons to be revered and glorified. For these characters paid offline appearances are the primary way to monetize their controversial fame. In live events and club parties the trash star enables the group to act out a sort of ironic fanaticism. In such occasions people are free to collegially indulge in a kind of wild collective effervescence around the ridiculous idol, since the shared awareness of the foolishness of such worship functions as an agent of disinhibition. As one interviewee at one of the analyzed events states:

First row, screaming, all of us singing and dancing, but none of us really knew what we were doing. It was all improvised in order to play the role of the real fan. I'm not sure I ever jumped and screamed so much at a real concert. (L., 22, Bello Figo concert, Parma)

Their farcical otherworldliness is used to infuse with exceptionality events like shop openings, parties and club venues. Just from this fact, we notice a first fundamental difference with the other events, as the presence of the trash star is instrumental to a process of emplacement (Smith, 1987) where is the space that is invested with a particular value. The encounter with the trash star may represent the apex of the event, but the party situation proceeds autonomously after that moment. In webstars meet-and-greets, instead, there is no event outside the encounter with the star. The trash star works like the ceremonial sacred object that keeps the ritual going, fostering the autonomy of the collective effervescence. The webstar, instead, works more like a devotional object that monopolizes the group attention and affectivity.

Secondly, the way trash stars are presented actively conceal the person behind the “meme”. The presenters don't entertain any dialogue with them that may reveal any detail of their feelings and daily lives. They instead prepare the ground by recalling those gestures and catchphrases through which the audience knows that specific trash star. The encounter, in this sense, amplifies instead of reducing the distance, as the trash star is requested to reproduce a stylized version of himself and to replicate the memetic traits that made him famous.

Thirdly, in these public exposures, the trash star usually remains in an elevated position in respect to the audience. Then the meeting and the photo taking does not happen in front of the audience but takes place at a side of the stage. This contact is carried out quickly, it lasts just the time of the photo recording of the encounter.

The contact between the two worlds is in this case much more controlled, ritualized and, in a way, dangerous; if prolonged, this contact risks to dissolve the ridiculous idol by showing the person that carries it.

Trash stars play the role of temporary fixed points around which the group can synchronize. This totemic power is not in contradiction with their distance from the star ideal, or with the marginal interest that audiences claim to devote them. Is precisely because of their explicit marginality that they can be treated as safe objects of worship. The obvious undesirability of their emulation makes it possible for them to accumulate attention without being envied. Thusly trash stars show a peculiar kind of “inverted charisma”, since the group coordination around them is not predicated on consent on their special quality, but on an agreement on the triviality of the situation.

While the young webstars’ fans want to adhere as much as possible to their world, the participants in these encounters have to be sure that the world of trash does not spill into the ordinary world. While the webstars’ events are presented and performed as occasions to erase the distance “imposed” by the screen, in the encounter with the trash stars the sacred/profane boundary is reinforced, made more visible and unsurmountable.

Conclusion

This paper tried to examine to what extent forms of the sacred may persist in the desecrated environment on online celebrity. By examining pre-staged physical encounters with Italian internet celebrities, the study wanted to examine the meanings performed in these media rituals and to test the current transformation of the categorical distinction between ordinary people and celebrities.

The intense emotions showed in the fan-star encounters may be understood as occurrences of what Mellor and Shilling call a “bio-economic sacred”, that is a modality of the sacred evident in modern societies in which “anything, including worldly phenomena, can be ‘set apart’ from and emotionally responded to as ‘special’ in relation to mundane life (Mellor & Shilling 2014, p. 22). There is, however, a peculiar chiasm between webstars, trash stars and the bio-economic sacred. The analysis showed the existence of two distinct types of contact with social media celebrities: one that is “extended,” repeated in time and aimed at an emotional and physical intimacy (with canonical webstars), and one that is “fast,” bounded to the event and interested in preserving the idol’s exceptionality (mostly observable with trash stars).

Hence, if the bio-economic sacred manifest its emotional surplus more in the contact with the youth webstars, it is in the ritually controlled contact with the trash stars that we

can witness a survival of the formal characters of the sacred, like the logic of emplacement, the distance with sacred object and separation between worlds.

Here we see how irony and reflexivity don't necessarily work as forces that undermine the sacred. Instead, the ridicule frame facilitates the acceptance of ritualized action and the producing of a subjunctive universe, by communicating the suspension of the criteria of sincerity demanded by the modern cult of the self (Seligman et al., 2008).

The second point to make concerns the redefinition of the traditional relationship between fame and the labour on the star presence. The corporal, sensual, even thaumaturgical contact with fans does not necessarily acquire importance only after a critical concentration of celebrity capital. In the case of webstars it becomes a physical work with a "therapeutical" quality that has to be performed since the very early stages of the rise to fame.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the question of whether these events reinforce or tends to blur the symbolic boundaries between fan and celebrities, requires further analysis. Observed traits such as the emotional proximity, physical fatigue and availability, ostentatious averageness and fan-star reciprocity, and the brief duration of fandom span, are all elements that frame these events as occasions dedicated to the facilitate the crossing between worlds: a crossing between the ordinary and celebrity, between online and offline, but also a crossing from childhood to adolescence, from taste as heteronomy to taste as autonomy and from phantasy idols to the seductive allure of personified idols.

The interpretation of this crossing is however uncertain. On the one hand it is possible that these encounters function on the long-term as a de-mythization force, as events that normalize fame to a point of unexceptionality, preparing the ground for a future in which visibility and social distance are less and less associated.

On the other hand, another interpretation is possible: that they function as rehearsal for the more long-lasting fandoms of adolescence, rehearsal in which they interiorize the habitus of the proper fan, incorporating gestures, affects, literacies and subject positions that will fully express in the teenage years.

Biographical note

He is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Università IUAV di Venezia. He received his PhD in Communication Studies from the University of Urbino in 2016, with a thesis that investigated the relationship between celebrity and ridicule in digital culture. He also collaborates with the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies (DISCUI) of the University of Urbino in research projects on communities on social media, contemporary theatre audiences, audience development and festival audiences. His research interests revolve around the study of digital media, social networks and performative practices.

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Notes

¹ Although English sounding, the term “webstar” represents mostly an Italian way to refer to internet celebrities and, in particular, to those young stars that acquired fame through *cross-platform influence* (Abidin 2018) and whose main audience is composed of pre-teen and teen social media users (mostly YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat).

² For example: Di Martino, S. [Samuele di Martino]. (2018) *HO LIMONATO CON UNA FAN - Sfida BACIO o SCHIAFFO Feat. Nick*. From: <https://youtu.be/vJKsXt8Wnxc>

³ The youtuber Riccardo Dose has been among the most vocal critics of the phenomenon, for example in the video *LO SQUALLORE DI CHI BACIA LE BAMBINE DI 10 ANNI!* (“the baseness of those who kisses ten years old girls”, my translation): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyThJ_fGVsY

⁴ The para-religious parallelism, and in particular the suggested resemblance between religious and celebrity worship, has also been object of widespread criticism from multiple field, like religion studies (Doss, 1999), cultural studies (Frow, 1998) and fan studies (Hills, 2002).

⁵ For example: Alessandrini, M. [CiccioGamer89]. (2018). *CiccioGamer89 Live Show, un Gamer a Teatro*. From: https://youtu.be/jl_ZoQoU8LE

⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/webstarsmania/>

⁷ <https://doubletap.live/>

⁸ <https://www.beautifulfestival.it/>

⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/madeininternetofficial/>

¹⁰ From: <https://www.fabriquemilano.it/live/made-in-internet/>. My translation, my emphasis.

¹¹ Even if all the events were open to everybody and most of them didn't required a pass or admission fee, the presence of the researcher was always notified to the event's organizers before it took place. During the event I wore a self-made badge with my name and my academic affiliation. Before any on site interview or informal talk I always stated my identity, the aim of the research and the fact that the conversation was recorded for research purposes. I audio-recorded the events where a presenter was involved. I also took several photos and videos of the events that were used solely as research material and that therefore were never showed to or shared with anybody.

¹² While the participant observation in events with webstars took place in the last 18 months (since May 2017), I attended trash stars' events since the beginning of 2015, as a part of a research that focused specifically on social media and ironic/derogatory fame.