

Performing celebrity motherhood on Twitter: Courting homage and [momentary] disaster – the case of Peaches Geldof.

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@peaches-g ‘Just how far the cult of celebrity and super fandom has come when grown women are passing their own kids round. I hate the world sometimes’.

The above was part of a Twitter message that Peaches Geldof published in November 2013. In it she also named the two women who had allowed the Lost Prophets’ singer Ian Watkins to abuse their babies. What became key elements focused upon by journalists in the newspaper debate that followed, her subsequent deletion of the message and apology, was the purpose of Twitter as a form of communication, and the celebritisation of public discourse. This tweet was constructed as an empty-headed, gossipy, childish and hence feminised intervention into the public sphere.¹ Also tied up with this debate was the on-going narrative of the ‘non-functionality’ of celebrity culture and its ‘reflexive exhibitionism’ (Hyde 2013). Yet Geldof had, until this point, used a combination of Twitter and Instagram to enact a self-transformation from girlhood to motherhood that had drawn critical affirmation from both media pundits and female followers via the social media sites. It is this image of motherhood that has informed the reporting of her sudden death of a heroin overdose at the age of 25 on 7 April 2014.

Geldof’s intervention and comment on the failure of mothers to protect their children in the above cited tweet, should be analysed in the context of her own very serious performance of that identity. The press narrative of ‘Peaches Geldof’ from her early teenage

years was one of ‘documenting’ the wild-child party brat. It focused on drug use, allegations of shop lifting, and inappropriate relationships, and her apparent lack of direction in terms of career – the ‘pick and mix’ media presence on television, writing for newspapers and magazines and appearing on catwalks and as the face of trend fashion labels. Whilst there was a certain amount of grudging admiration for youthful confidence, evident in the repeated use of the term ‘precocious’ in journalistic descriptions of Geldof’s activities, the term ‘MDF’ (My Daddy’s Famous), coined by the press for her and other children of famous parents, suggested her fame lacked substance. Tracking her representation in the UK press, it is apparent that there was an abrupt shift in her image at the point at which she became a mother.

Geldof’s use of social media made the performance of motherhood, and the judgement of this performance, much more visible. From the success of the web community of Mumsnet as a lay lobbying force (Gambles 2010), through to amateur and professional parenting blogs or social media feeds, the discussion and display of mothering skills has never seemed more intense. Celebrity mothers and motherwork play an important role in setting the parameters for that particular aspect of female identity for women in general. On the one hand, the Hollywood actress or supermodel perpetuates an image of ‘serene, selfless, self-fulfilled and spontaneous’ mothering (Feasey 2013) as in the ‘intensive mothering’ profile constructed for A-list celebrities, like Sarah Jessica Parker, Angelina Jolie and Gwyneth Paltrow. On the other are those like Britney Spears, who are portrayed as the embodiment of bad mothering; Spears earning herself the moniker ‘Unfitney’, with her increasingly bizarre and unstable public appearances. Feasey identifies an in-between category which she locates in the genre of popular reality television; that of ‘... recognisable women who are currently challenging these maternal myths by letting audiences view their day-to-day, mundane – and otherwise – motherwork’ (Feasey 2013, p.132). Alicia Douvall,

Katie Price, and Kerry Katona present themselves as ‘accessible, available and candid’ (p.134), offering ‘... an acceptable rather than appropriate mother, or rather what has been termed the ‘good enough’ rather than ideal maternal figure’ (ibid, p.141). These representations, Feasey argues, have greater credibility, in particular with a younger and working class female demographic.

Geldof, in her daily tweets and instagrams, enacted a similar form of ‘good enough’ motherhood, encapsulated in her account tagline ‘Waging a never-ending war against dirty nappies ...’. Her use of social media was in the register of ‘backstage access’ and ‘dialogism’ (Marwick and boyd 2011). The responses, from an almost entirely female set of fans and followers,ⁱⁱ constituted public group encouragement of her decisions and actions with regards to her children. Very few responses were redirected to Geldof specifically, as a form of fan-to-celebrity, one-to-one, private-aside conversation. Instead, each of the responses contributed to a collective dynamic that offered advice and shared information between members, not only in respect to Geldof. Her presentation of motherhood was highly visual, sharing photographs of sleepy-eyed children sitting up in bed, playing in the garden, sitting in the car and messily eating. The quickly taken snapshot of a particular moment, reminiscent of the family album, generated a familiar and intimate tone for Geldof’s followers.

Geldof made reference in her tweets to her own mother, Paula Yates, at the time of her marriage to Cohen and when she was pregnant. However, the photograph of Geldof as a blonde three-year-old in the arms of her mother, which Geldof put up on Instagram and Twitter just before her death, will remain the iconic image in the final tying together by the press of these two women’s narratives.ⁱⁱⁱ In newspaper stories about Geldof across the years, nearly all make reference to Yates and their similarities in appearance and temperament. Between 1997 and 2000, before her death through a heroin overdose at the age of 41, stories

about Yates, her battles over child custody with Bob Geldof and her portrayal as the grieving-but-thought-to-be-coping single mother after the suicide of Michael Hutchence were ubiquitous in the tabloids. It is this image of ‘motherhood-as-struggle-but-ultimate-joy’, a simultaneous reification and critique of that role, which now ties mother and daughter’s narratives together in press perpetuity. Yates too embodied ‘good enough’ motherwork; the invocation of her memory serving to underpin the performance of the same by her daughter.

This use of Twitter, sharing family space and time with fans, is not ‘new’ in a general sense. Access to film stars ‘behind-the-scenes’ was a feature of the Hollywood studio promotional and publicity system; the ‘ordinariness’ in the extra-ordinary/ordinary dialectic. However, qualitatively, Twitter use, such as that by Geldof, presents itself, as part of the public-private, in its declaration of in-the-momentness and self-authorship, as more transparent and honest. For many, this has particular resonance in a period of recession where images of ideal motherhood for most women instead of a fantasy become a farce and where ‘good enough’ mothering itself becomes a heroic enterprise.

References

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ⁱ This incident followed on from a libel case involving Sally Bercow, the wife of the UK Speaker of the House of Commons, and her use of Twitter to comment on an ongoing investigation of a past paedophilia ring. Much of the writing in the newspapers (on the undoubted illegality of both Geldof's and Bercow's messages), took on sombre paternalistic tones (Rozenburg 2013).

ⁱⁱ This is based on the writer's observations of the conversations taking place on Geldof's twitter feed in the last six months.

ⁱⁱⁱ The most comprehensive of these is a recent piece by Orr (2014).