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George Clooney, by Paul McDonald. BFI, 2019, 206 pp.

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In one of the latest additions to the BFI Film Stars series, Paul McDonald turns the spotlight on the filmic and extrafilmic career of contemporary male performer George Clooney (1961–). Edited by Martin Shingler and Susan Smith, the series launched in 2012 with the former's general guide, *Star Studies: A Critical Guide*, and the latter's individual star study *Elizabeth Taylor*. The editors state an overarching aim of producing one hundred titles over a twenty-year period, each profiling a separate performer from Western and world cinema. At the time of writing, eighteen titles investigating performers, past and present, have been released, including Pam Cook's *Nicole Kidman*, Ginette Vincendeau's *Brigitte Bardot*, Andrew Klevan's *Barbara Stanwyck* and Ulrike Sieglohr's *Hanna Schygulla*. More recently, British stars James Mason and Deborah Kerr have been analysed by Sarah Thomas and Sarah Street respectively. Each book provides a short study of the chosen star and are written from a variety of perspectives by an eclectic range of established and emerging scholars of the discipline.

The author of *The Star System: Hollywood's Production of Popular Identities* and *Hollywood Stardom*, as well as the editor of several anthologies including *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry* with Janet Wasko, McDonald has repeatedly proven himself to be an expert on the Hollywood film industry and its stars in both the classical and contemporary eras. Additionally, and importantly, he provided the foreword to the 1998 re-release of Richard Dyer's *Stars*, the seminal star studies text.

In *George Clooney*, McDonald presents the actor within the landscape of contemporary Hollywood cinema, while also exploring ways in which the actor's constructed star image is consistently tied to a sense of nostalgia for the industry's historical past and the star system of the golden age, not least through the frequent comparisons made between Clooney and classical actors Cary Grant and Clark Gable in the press.

The book is broken down into four main chapters, which stand alongside a lengthy introduction and briefer conclusion. Each main chapter focuses on a different facet of Clooney's star persona and work together to concisely build up a comprehensive depiction of the actor's on- and off-screen image. Chapter One is concerned with the initial construction of Clooney's star persona, discussing his early career on television, most notably his star-making role as Dr Doug Ross in the medical drama *ER*, as well as his early position as a heartthrob for predominantly female audiences and his subsequent, although not always successful, initial move into cinema. Chapter Two explores differences between the concepts of actor and star, analysing ways in which Clooney "performs" his own identifiable brand of stardom which makes him a star actor. Chapter Three explores Clooney's work both within and outside the confines of Hollywood, investigating his diverse work as actor, producer, director, and writer

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across mainstream and independent filmmaking. Finally, Chapter Four takes an in-depth look at Clooney's political work, both on- and off-screen, which McDonald also observes as being a critical component of the performer's star identity.

Beginning with an introduction that explores Clooney's place within modern cinema, McDonald compellingly discusses the actor's arrival in Hollywood, and his possessing neither the "musculinity" of action stars Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Bruce Willis, the "adult-boyishness" of Tom Cruise and Brad Pitt, or the "vulnerable everymanness" of Tom Hanks. Instead, Clooney's version of masculinity was "handsome, cool, suave, charming, smooth, mature and elegantly styled" (1), elements which have all endured to this day in relation to both his on- and off-screen personas. McDonald also highlights here his wish to historically place the "Clooney brand" within the industrial and market contexts of contemporary Hollywood, which he successfully does throughout in terms of both Clooney's image and stardom in general (3). As the author suggests, most brands "announce their presence in the marketplace through the signifying vehicles of trademarked logos, memorable names, and catchy slogans or taglines", whereas stars use their bodies and voices to create their own brand and thus "communicate branded distinctiveness" (5). Elaborating on this, he suggests that while product brands help to both differentiate and standardise goods, the performances of star brands help produce differences and similarities between films. However, in order to function as a saleable asset, a star must always be seen to be "playing themselves" across roles (5). Thus, his key areas of investigation, which receive a chapter each, are the ways in which the Clooney brand has directed dynamic tensions between television and film, actor and star, independence and Hollywood, and entertainment and politics. As McDonald explains, although Clooney is very much a figure of modern Hollywood, there also exists "multiple lines of association" between him and older Hollywood (7). Thus, as McDonald proposes at the close of the introductory chapter, a recurrent theme of retro-stardom runs through the book, both because it forms an essential element of the Clooney brand, and since he is an actor "who belongs to Hollywoods both present and past" (10). Describing Clooney's self-deprecating humour as a way of working against his masculine confidence, while also being the ultimate expression of it, he could just as easily be talking about the star persona and comedic performances of Cary Grant in films like *Bringing Up Baby* (Howard Hawks, 1938), *My Favourite Wife* (Garson Kanin, 1940) and *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra, 1944), where his extreme handsomeness and impeccably tailored suits defy his overtly comedic physical comedy and hyperbolic facial expressions.

Between 1994 and 1999 Clooney progressed from a household name in *ER* to starring in his first cinematic releases, creating tensions and conflicts due to these "differing modes of screen-acting fame" (13). It is on these conflicts that McDonald concentrates throughout the first chapter, particularly aiming to problematise "the inevitability or predictability" of Clooney becoming a star by highlighting how his moving between screen medias "stands as both an opportunity and risk in the production of post-studio Hollywood stardom" (14). Thus, even though he had been the leading attraction in a recurring role in a hit television series, that position did not guarantee cinematic success. As McDonald points out, Clooney's early ventures into film were poorly received, perhaps no more so than with *Batman & Robin* (Joel Schumacher, 1997). Moving between television and film, described as "divergent generic forms", McDonald suggests that the problem may have arisen because the actor's career lacked focus and definition (25). Furthermore, although *ER* had given him fame and recognition, it also meant that he was primarily associated with "the 'inferior' medium of television", just as early film actors were deemed to be lower than those performing on stage (45).

Chapter One explores the actor's performance in *Out of Sight* (Steven Soderbergh, 1998) in detail, with the author noting that it can retrospectively be viewed as Clooney's star-defining film, stabilising the inconsistences of his previous roles and legitimising him as "Hollywood film material", although at the time of its release there was no evidence to suggest Clooney as "a compelling commercial attraction" (46, 37). It is a still from this film that graces the cover of McDonald's book, and several screengrabs are included within, which help illustrate the detailed analysis of specific scenes, such as the exploration of the actor's changing facial expressions and gestures whilst bungling a getaway (40). Studying another scene, this time with costar Jennifer Lopez, McDonald refers to the actor's use of "stillness, deep vocal tones, fixed eye contact and slight smile" as an appropriate performance style to convey the intimacy of the scene (41). He declares it the first film to contain a set of characteristics that have remained consistent to the Clooney brand, which therefore makes it a particularly significant film in this respect too. These characteristics are, according to McDonald, his position as a lead in a film which has an interesting and strongly defined ensemble cast; secondly, his associations with the comedy genre, combined with elements of crime and/or romance; and, finally, the actor matching his performance to the generic credentials of comedy by "easily juxtaposing suave bodily manners and vocal tones with comedic exaggeration" (44). With this concluding statement, McDonald could again just as easily be talking about Cary Grant, the classical-era actor with whom Clooney is most often associated. In fact, his analysis closely parallel's Adrienne L. McLean's 2019 study of Grant's performance in the screwball comedy *His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940). However, as McDonald notes, although comedy and romance have consistently been integral elements of the Clooney brand, his oeuvre remains too diverse for him to be solely labelled either a comedic or romantic star.

Likewise, as the author's first point interestingly suggests, although Clooney is a major Hollywood star with a distinctly recognisable star persona, his biggest hits have actually been films in which he appears as part of a large ensemble, such as the *Oceans* trilogy, made between 2001 and 2007. Thus, it may be that Clooney requires other stars around him, in this case the likes of Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and Julia Roberts, in order for him to generate a hit. Likewise, the actor received the most off-screen attention in the press after his courtship with and 2014 marriage to barrister Amal Alamuddin (now professionally known as Amal Clooney).

Chapter Two, "Performing Stardom: Actor/Star" looks at ways in which Clooney is both like other actors and unlike them, since he "belongs to that small elite who are actor-stars" (47). McDonald begins this chapter with a more general account of what makes a performer a star, exploring how the micro-actions of voice and body are used to create a character, and that it is this minute detail that scholars of acting and performance must focus on in order to determine how a performance is created, rather than looking broadly at a whole performance. McDonald employs this method through the analysis of Clooney's distinct but similar modes of performance in the films *O, Brother, Where Art Thou* (Ethan and Joel Coen, 2000) and *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) which help immensely in illustrating his argument about what the Clooney brand is. Looking at Clooney's performance style in precise detail, he explores the gestural "tic" that Clooney adopted early in his career, which involves nodding or shaking his head from side to side in small, rapid movements and occasionally dropping his head to one side. As he suggests, "it may only be a small action but Clooney's head-jigging encapsulates the tensions and paradoxes of star acting" since the movement is both a sign of difference and continuity, thus becoming "a signature mannerism" visible across his other films (55). Calling Clooney's voice a distinct "deep, throaty timbre, occasionally verging on a growl, with a steady and deliberate pace", McDonald declares that few contemporary actors working in modern American cinema are so immediately recognised by their voices alone, although he

does not provide any other examples (55). He concludes by suggesting that voice is another key vehicle for the Clooney brand and yet, in the world market, he is often dubbed by others, thus removing a significant element of his star persona. This chapter also touches on Clooney's involvement in advertising of products for brands, not least Martini and Nespresso which "capitalized on the look, movement and vocal characterizing Clooney's Clooneyness", as well as other manly products such as luxurious cars, sunglasses, whisky and watches (84).

Chapter Three, "Flexible Stardom: Independent/Hollywood", explores Clooney's ability to liberally move across commercial and noncommercial filmmaking by examining his position in front of and behind the camera, and across several creative roles as actor-director-producer-writer. McDonald refers to these multiple facets as "flexible stardom", suggesting that this too has become part of Clooney's branded identity, as it did with past performers like Orson Welles, Ida Lupino and Charles Chaplin. Surprisingly perhaps, McDonald notes that Clooney has starred in very few high-budget productions, instead mostly appearing in "medium- to lower-budget tiers of production" for both major Hollywood studios and independent studios (101). Chapter Four, "Actorvist Stardom: Entertainment/Politics", discusses the political aspects of Clooney's star image through detailed analysis of the actor's political on-screen roles in *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) and *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) and his extremely active off-screen political stance which has resulted in the juxtaposing of politics and entertainment in the Clooney brand.

McDonald draws from a diverse range of sources, which are implemented throughout the volume, including his own extensive work on stardom placed alongside a wide range of academic and general texts which help illustrate his points. He also includes tables and graphs analysing data on box-office grossing, rankings and scales of release for Clooney's films. Furthermore, he quotes widely from the actor himself, through interviews Clooney has given over the decades to a variety of publications, and which help convey the actor as both an eloquent speaker and an intelligent man. Exploring an actor's extrafilmic presence can be extremely telling, and McDonald investigates Clooney's early status as a heartthrob, primarily presented for female audiences, through the exploration of several articles published about the actor in the 1990s. These articles had titles such as "Gorgeous George", "Swooning Over Clooney" and "Heartthrob Hotel", and the author notes how the marketing of Clooney in this way reached its peak when he was named *People* magazine's "Sexiest Man Alive" in 1997.

Overall, McDonald has written a concise and extremely enjoyable account of Clooney's career and image, striking the right balance between being easy to digest and intellectually thought-provoking. Furthermore, it has the ability to appeal to those familiar with Clooney's body of work and individuals who have seen few, or even none, of his screen performances. This volume would also hold appeal for students and researchers outside of film studies, for example through the exploration of Clooney's work off-screen as a humanitarian and the concepts around celebrities and politics, as well as more general readers interested in the actor and his career progression.

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Gillian Kelly's areas of academic interest include stardom, performers of classical Hollywood cinema and media representations of gender, particularly masculinity. She explores the concept of "lost" stars, as well as the construction and development of individual star personas over time. Her first monograph, *Robert Taylor: Male Beauty, Masculinity and Stardom in Hollywood* (2019) investigates Taylor's image and performance skills across his career, exploring both his filmic and extrafilmic images within their industrial and socio-historical timeframes. She is currently writing her second book, a study of Tyrone Power, for Edinburgh University Press's International Film Stars series.