MARY R. DESJARDINS *and* GERD GEMÜNDEN

Introduction

Marlene Dietrich's Appropriations

ON 16 MAY 2002, Marlene Dietrich was named an honorary citizen of Berlin in a celebration held in City Hall. Her grandson, Peter Riva, received a certificate of honor from Walter Momper, president of the Berlin Parliament, and in his laudatio the city mayor Klaus Wowereit expressed his pride about the achievements of Berlin's most famous native daughter. But the mayor also reminded his audience of the difficult relationship between Berliners and Dietrich, who had faced suspicion and hatred in this city and elsewhere in Germany after World War II, most visibly when her 1960 concert tour was picketed. As many in the audience knew, the efforts to make her an honorary citizen of Berlin dated as far back as 1991, and for a good part of the 1990s the city was involved in an unsuccessful and ultimately publicly embarrassing struggle to name a street after her in her native district of Schöneberg. Even her funeral in Berlin, ten years prior to the event in City Hall, was an occasion for controversy, when what had been planned as a celebration of homecoming became once again the target of some Berliners' long-standing resentments toward "the traitor" (see Koch, "Exorcised"). Honoring Dietrich in 2002 was thus for Berlin's politicians a much belated act of restitution, the final stage of a slow process of rapprochement that was, in Wowereit's words, "not without pain and embarrassment."[1]

The process of reconciliation between Dietrich and "her" Berlin(ers) is part of a long and drawn-out love-hate relationship between the diva

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

and the Germans that began with her rise to fame in 1930 and extends into the present. Yet the struggle over claiming and disclaiming Dietrich as part of Berlin and Germany's cultural heritage partakes in strategies of appropriation in which Dietrich has to be seen not only as the object of cultural capital but also as an agent. For the appropriation of most diverse styles, fashions, and personas was, in fact, a trademark of Dietrich's career, and central to the on-screen and offscreen image that she and others designed for her. These styles of dress, behavior, and artistic performance might be best described in terms of the transformations, masquerading, and perhaps most of all, mobility, they suggested—mobility among high and low cultures; among heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual identities; among masculine and feminine gender identities; among European and American cultures. Although many others in the 1920s, especially those in the arts and entertainment fields, also embraced a playful attitude toward identity construction, Dietrich's masquerades and transformations were enacted with discipline and wit and were conceptualized as part of a plan to further her ambitions. As Joseph Garncarz shows in his essay in this volume, Dietrich had carefully modeled her Weimar screen roles on the Swedish Greta Garbo's Hollywood image long before Josef von Sternberg's "discovery" of her, as part of a carefully planned strategy to attract the attention of American film studios. She would later discard the Garbo imitation (although many, from studio promotion men to lesbian fans, continued to link the two stars in a variety of ways) and, in a collaboration with film director von Sternberg, created a persona seemingly defined by a cool, witty self-reflexive knowledge of the masquerades that constitute identity.

The result of Dietrich's talent for creative appropriation, invention, and reinvention is an international professional career of some seventy years, one that included not only classic Hollywood cinema, Weimar silent film, and the concert hall, but also classical theater, modern theater, musical comedies, vaudeville, army camp shows, radio, recordings, television, even circus and the ballet. It has made her one of the most multivalent icons of the twentieth century. *Dietrich Icon* explores this multivalency. While it joins other recent critical works focused on one film star, this volume attests the degree to which Dietrich—like no other star image—has been central to discourses of both the polis (e.g., the projects of nationalization) and the academy (e,g., the projects of film theory).[2]

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Nationalizing Dietrich

Today's debate about (dis)claiming Dietrich for Germany had its beginnings even prior to her 1930 departure to Hollywood. For many Berliners, Dietrich's penchant for the femme fatale, her refusal of traditional roles of womanhood in favor of sexual independence and androgyny was profoundly un-German. Conservative cultural critics perceived these tendencies to be symptomatic of the destabilizing, if not degenerate, effects of modernity, often blaming them on an "Americanization" that invaded all spheres of public and private life (see Stefan Zweig). *The Blue Angel* (1930) underscores the ambivalence of belonging of its female protagonist by foregrounding the problematic of arrival, departure, and ill-fated homecomings. As Elisabeth Bronfen explores in her essay in this volume, in her role as Lola Lola, Dietrich anticipates her actual departure from home and her relocation in Hollywood, performing the story of the birth of the female star as a radical negotiation of displacement and loss of home. The liminality of the film was also dictated by the fact that it was shot in two languages and produced by two studios. Patrice Petro's essay in this volume reassesses the film's hybrid nature and position between sound and silent film, Ufa (Universum Film AG) and Paramount, and the film's contested status in German and American national film history by taking a closer look at what exact role Dietrich's famous legs played in this. What both essays underscore is that from the beginning Dietrich's fame was accompanied by the question whether she really was a "German" star.

After 1930, Dietrich returned to her native country only for short visits, resisting Joseph Goebbels's many offers to join the film industry of the Third Reich. Erica Carter's contribution to this volume shows how the efforts of the Nazi film industry to promote a popular cinema revolved around creating a star system for which the absent Dietrich became a most important model. Attacked in the Nazi press for her "Dirnenrollen" (roles as prostitutes; qtd. in Knopp 369) and her collaboration with "the Jew Sternberg," Hitler secretly admired and courted her throughout the 1930s. A U.S. citizen as of 1939, she actively supported the war effort by performing for U.S. troops stationed abroad and was awarded the Medal of Freedom in 1947, the first woman to receive this distinction.

In many ways, the flip side of the difficult relationship between the émi-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

gré Dietrich and her homeland is her political attitude toward the United States. A typical first-generation immigrant, she firmly believed in the host country's founding principles, developing a strong sense of political loyalty, and a willingness to support and uphold these principles.[3] That Dietrich did so much beyond the call of duty we can credit to her Prussian sense of duty, to her astute insight into the real dimension of Nazi Germany's military threat, and to a true commitment to American democracy. Dietrich's first return to Germany after the war was in the company of U.S. combat troops. Postwar Germany treated her with the resentment and ostracism typical for the returning émigré. When her 1960 concert at the Titania Palast was picketed, the signs read "Marlene, hau ab!" *and* "Marlene go home," just to make it absolutely clear that she no longer belonged in Berlin. It is no accident that the first Berlin politician to officially reach out to Dietrich was himself a returning émigré—Willy Brandt, mayor of Berlin from 1957 to 1966, and later German chancellor. By virtue of the fact of how easy it had been for Dietrich and others to decide which side to fight on, they challenged the notion of Germans as victims of Hitler's machinery of manipulation. Dietrich, the seducer, had no difficulty in resisting the Nazis' power of seduction, and in upholding fundamental notions of human judgment. Dietrich's own family provides the best example of the glaring contrast of political choices—her sister, Elisabeth Will, followed her husband Georg to Bergen-Belsen to operate a movie theater for concentration camp guards, assuming in essence the same function of entertaining the troops as Dietrich would on the other side.[4]

A decisive step toward reconciliation was taken by Dietrich herself, who, moved by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, willed to be buried in her home city, next to her mother, despite not having visited Germany for many years. This step was followed up in 1993, when the city bought Dietrich's extensive estate from her daughter, Maria Riva, and made the Marlene Dietrich Collection a central part of the new Filmmuseum Berlin. Werner Sudendorf, head curator of the Dietrich Collection, describes in his contribution to this volume the history of the acquisition of the collection and its impact on Dietrich scholarship, and he lists in detail what the collection comprises.[5] Five years later, the Marlene-Dietrich-Platz was inaugurated in the midst of the reconstructed Potsdamer Platz, the new capital's showcase for entertainment and commercialism.[6] A postage stamp issued in 1997 now celebrates Dietrich as an important woman in German history, alongside such figures as philosopher Hannah

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Dietrich's grave, Berlin. *Photo by Gerd Gemünden.*

Arendt, artist Käthe Kollwitz, and resistance fighter Sophie Scholl. In 2001, numerous events in Berlin and all over Germany commemorated the hundredth birthday of Dietrich, and President Johannes Rau praised Dietrich.

Most recently, on 12 June 2003, the city of Paris inaugurated *its* Place Marlène Dietrich, in recognition of her loyalty to France and her long-standing love of French culture (she was also made a member of the French Legion of Honor in 1951). Like so many German émigrés, Dietrich returned to Europe, but not to Germany. Instead, she made Paris her home for the last, reclusive years of her life, a choice for which the city showed its appreciation when for a while it paid rent for the apartment of the bankrupt diva. For her burial in Berlin, Dietrich's coffin was draped with the Tricolore, then the Star-Spangled Banner, and finally the German flag—the diva's parting gesture to the Germans that her homecoming was still a conflicted one.

Theorizing Dietrich

The past and ongoing contemporary debates about national identity in relation to Marlene Dietrich suggest a placement of her biographical and performative personas in specific historical, cultural, and even geographic

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

contexts. Dietrich's star image has also been central to film theory, from the auteurist analyses of von Sternberg, to some of the most important debates on how film functions as an ideological and psychic apparatus. But these film theories have not always contextualized her star image in very specific historical terms, except as it serves to exemplify the character, strategies, and effects of the classic cinema tradition that dominated Hollywood film production—its narrative, visual, and soundtrack practices—from the late 1920s to the 1960s.

Cahiers du Cinema's collectively written ideological critique, "Josef von Sternberg's *Morocco*," analyzes how the erotic mythology of the woman in classic Hollywood film functions to mask social determinations. In the essay's reading of *Morocco*, Dietrich may represent the epitome of the fetishistic eroticization that defines a star as star, but von Sternberg's need to appropriate to himself the value of the star (exemplified by such statements as "Marlene is not Marlene, Marlene is me, and she knows that better than anyone") results in filmic patterns in which male characters both devalue Dietrich's character as an object of desire and fantasize and mourn her abandonment of or inaccessibility to them (Cahiers du Cinema Collective, 180–81). The Cahiers editors employ auteurist, psychoanalytic, and ideological (Marxist) theories to conclude that the film's use of Dietrich within its "plastic effects" of masks, veils, and plays with light constitutes the image itself as gauze or screen, determines its fetishistic appeal, and ultimately exposes it as one of the preeminent examples of classic Hollywood cinema's implication within the bourgeois, patriarchal capitalist system of production and erotic expression.

The Cahiers essay, with its focus on the figure of woman/Dietrich as object of exchange in a patriarchal system, presaged not only the feminist film theory that followed in the 1970s and 1980s, but that theory's preoccupation with Dietrich's image in particular. Claire Johnston, whose 1974 essay "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema" serves as a mediating link between the Cahiers essay and Laura Mulvey's highly influential "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," argues that the implications of the Cahiers analysis is that classical Hollywood cinema constructs a binary not of male and female, but male and nonmale. The fetishization of the female functions as a phallic replacement, and, argues Johnston, the popularity of stars such as Dietrich and Mae West (at one time Dietrich's dressing-room neighbor at Paramount) suggests the degree to which such phallocentrism is a collective fantasy.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Mulvey's famous argument, published in 1975, basically agrees with much of these earlier assessments, but deepens and complicates the place of Dietrich's image within classical cinema's practices. As is well known, Mulvey links the camera, the filmic character, and the (masculine) spectator of classical cinema as constructed within positions of looking that control the female image. While Mulvey suggests that the "look" in the films of Hitchcock submits the female character and image to sadistic control as a way to assuage the anxiety of castration the character or image provokes, she uses von Sternberg's imaging of Dietrich to exemplify the fetishization of the female image. Although she argues that such fetishization allows for the threat of woman to be disavowed through her overvaluation, her use of close textual analysis, with its special attention to the way von Sternberg uses screen depth, light, costume, and mise-en-scène (elements given less attention in the previous theoretical analyses of Johnston and Cahiers) to create an image of woman through Dietrich, makes her conclude that the Dietrich character is not mediated for the spectator by the controlling gaze of the male protagonist. Instead, Mulvey argues provocatively, the spectator has access to "direct erotic rapport" with Dietrich.

Mulvey's essay has, by some accounts, elicited more commentary—both assenting and dissenting—than any other piece of film theory. While it is impossible to account for all responses, several have a particular place within the theorization of Dietrich's star image and its relation to patriarchal filmic constructions of femininity. Peter Baxter's 1978 essay, "On the Naked Thighs of Miss Dietrich," is in many ways compatible with Mulvey's argument—the image of Dietrich (here, the circulation of Dietrich's image as Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel*) is an invitation to reexperience the dread and pleasure of past infantile experience in which the mother has a central role. But Baxter departs from Mulvey when he proposes that this association of Dietrich with the maternal is not necessarily misogynist. He argues that Dietrich's image as Lola Lola is so compelling in the film and in its continued circulation in print because it speaks to the libidinal experiences that a capitalist, patriarchal culture tries to repress. In other words, for this Marxist-psychoanalytic critique from the 1970s, the ongoing circulation of Dietrich's image is a potentially liberating return of the repressed.

In the 1982 essay "Spectacle and Narrative Theory" by Lea Jacobs and Richard de Cordova, the authors analyze *The Scarlet Empress* (the von

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Sternberg film in which Dietrich plays Catherine the Great) in light of Mulvey's insight that the insertion of woman in the system of narrative and spectacle of classical Hollywood film has ideological implications. However, in their attempt to better delineate the specific filmic nature of spectacle, they argue that this mode of expression in some scenes of *Scarlet Empress* is one of direct address, a fact that suggests the performer—here, Dietrich—participates in the enunciation, or at least its performance. In other words, they broach the possibility of a politics and expression of performance associated with Dietrich in which the star has some power of authoring meaning.

In her 1988 book *In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich, and the Masochistic Aesthetic*, Gaylyn Studlar provides one of the most thorough critiques of Mulvey's model even though she continues the dialogue about the power and meaning of Dietrich's image within a psychoanalytic context. While Studlar agrees with Mulvey that the von Sternberg films expose the projection of male fantasy onto the female/Dietrich, she argues that the pleasures of looking in these films are structured around masochistic, rather than sadistic or sadomasochistic conflicts and pleasures. The male character-spectator submits to the gaze of the female/Dietrich in longing for a pre-Oedipal relation to the mother, before scenarios of maternal castration and lack dominate the formation of subjectivity. This argument is a direct intervention in the debates Mulvey initiated about the images of woman and the positions offered to both male and female spectators of the classical Hollywood film, suggesting that there are films and forms of spectatorship that subvert a patriarchal, heteronormative power agenda. In subsequent developments of her theory, Studlar argues that Mulvey does not explore the implications of her own point that von Sternberg's films with Dietrich allow for "direct erotic rapport" between the female image and spectators. Here, Studlar emphasizes the role of Dietrich, both as performer-enunciator and star image, in this subversion. Dietrich—the performer, not just Dietrich as von Sternberg character—"possesses an aloofness that suggests a distanciation from her constructed image, a refusal to invest in her 'femininity'" and its presumed aim of attracting men (Studlar, "Masochism, Masquerade" 243). It is through this quality that Dietrich, as well as her characters, gain power and appeal to women as well as men.

Around the same historical moment Studlar is developing a more

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

complex theory for the Dietrich image and performance in relation to a "masochistic aesthetic" and the "direct erotic rapport" that she seems to achieve with the spectator of the von Sternberg films, Judith Mayne refutes the notion that the transgressive aspects of Dietrich's star persona lie in her "returning" the gaze of the male in such diverse films as *The Blue Angel* and *Witness for the Prosecution*. Mayne argues that if "resistance" is the appropriate term to define the Dietrich image it is because "resistance is fully part of the narrative and visual imagery that comprise the Dietrich persona" (Mayne, "Marlene Dietrich" 42). For Mayne, this resistance is most clearly evident in Dietrich's enactment of characters who move among multiple modes of performance. In other words, resistance is an effect of the self-consciousness of performance itself, especially in the ironic imitations of the conventions of femininity enacted by Lola Lola of *The Blue Angel* and Christine of *Witness for the Prosecution*.

Taken together, the analyses of Dietrich from the late 1970s to the late 1980s suggest a movement away from understanding her star persona as an inert, passive image entirely constituted by a collective phallocentrism, toward an understanding of the Dietrich star persona as performed, contributing to the enunciation of the films' meanings and multiple positions available for spectators. Mayne's essay also gestures toward a historiographic understanding of the Dietrich star persona as developed and replayed over time, across different genres, national contexts, and historical moments. This is not to say that Dietrich had never been considered in historical context before by film scholars—both Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973) and Molly Haskell's *From Reverance to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) placed Dietrich alongside other "sex goddesses" and "femme fatales" of the 1930s in their survey treatments of filmic representations of women—but theoretical works about Dietrich in and since the 1990s most frequently intervene as *historiographic* studies, self-reflexive about the implications of historical work for theoretical insights. This is to say, while Haskell and (especially) Rosen, for all their valuable insights, often present overgeneralized views of Dietrich in Hollywood film history, the more recent works, including the essays in this volume, carefully delineate circumscribed industrial, national, and historical contexts for examining Dietrich, and in doing so, actually end up enlarging the perspectives of and places for Dietrich's star persona in film history and theory.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Several of the main contexts for examining the Dietrich persona in recent work have been in terms of queer politics and lesbian history, film genre studies, the female body, and technology, race, and biographical representational forms.[7] While Dietrich is discussed in some early film scholarship on homosexuality and Hollywood cinema, it is characteristic of these works to acknowledge her lesbian allure (often through mention of the "kissing scene" between Dietrich and another female character in *Morocco*), while dismissing it as an "exotic" touch likely meant to arouse the male spectator (Tyler; Russo) or as abandoned in the films' overwhelming advancement of the "male plot" (Arbuthnot and Seneca). However, Andrea Weiss, in her 1992 study of lesbians in film, *Vampires and Violets*, argues for the power of what are often "isolated moments" in Dietrich's films to pose a threat to the "male plot" and heterosexual renderings of homosexuality as exotica. One of the most significant aspects of her study is the emphasis on what Dietrich's performative queering of gender and sexuality might have meant for an underground, but growing, lesbian subculture in 1930s America. She contextualizes Dietrich's expression of queerness within what the available understandings of lesbianism at the time were for (often closeted) spectators (30–50). Patricia White's examination of the Greta Garbo–Mercedes de Acosta–Marlene Dietrich romantic triangle in 1930s Hollywood is also interested in historicizing what constitutes the signs of lesbian identity and style, what we now call lesbian "chic." The two female stars shared a female lover (de Acosta), but also a love for wearing trousers, and contributed to the historical construction of what can be encoded and decoded as lesbian (White, "Black and White"). So much of the early theory featuring Dietrich is focused on her films from the 1930s, but these works give us one of the best indications of how a particular group of spectators in that era might have actually understood and desired the Dietrich they saw both in films and in extratextual materials circulating at the time. White and Mary Desjardins have also analyzed representations of the queer Dietrich (White, *Uninvited*; Desjardins), again paired with Garbo, in the experimental video maker Cecelia Barriga's *Meeting Two Queens*. This 1991 video works by editing together not only the "isolated moments" of queerness in films starring Dietrich and Garbo, but also by creating new queer associations by juxtaposing shots of the two stars so that they appear to be in a movie together, longing for each other. White emphasizes the place of the video

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

in acknowledging and creating a lesbian archive, while Desjardins suggests that the video both acknowledges a historical lesbian community of the past and the present, and offers a melodramatic fantasy scenario that also solicits and queers female heterosexual desire (White, *Uninvited*; Desjardins). In this volume, Alice Kuzniar argues that the compilation of "isolated moments" of lesbianism and queerness in Dietrich's films can be a dissatisfying enterprise, especially as it encourages a spectatorial position wedded to fetishistic practices. As an alternative, she asks that we consider the narratives of Dietrich's films as queer, with Dietrich's excess display of femininity suggesting she is "passing" for straight. Kuzniar then finds a continuum in Dietrich's star persona by examining the narratives of a number of von Sternberg's films alongside *A Foreign Affair*, the postwar film directed by Billy Wilder, as films suggesting the secrecy of "the closet," and affording extended and contextualized queer moments in the spectator's construction of Dietrich.

Among the scholars centralizing the importance of Dietrich's star persona in Hollywood film industry history, at a time in the early 1990s when the psychoanalytic paradigm guiding textual analysis and spectator studies was being decentralized, were those focusing on the production histories of the fallen woman film, the genre that best characterizes the majority of films Dietrich made with von Sternberg. Lea Jacobs's examination of the Hollywood Production Code Administration (PCA) and of its negotiations with studios over their production of the "fallen woman" genre contributes to a more historically contextualized understanding of Dietrich's persona—in fact, Dietrich was not the only female star whose persona was partially constructed in terms of the sexually transgressive characters she played on screen in the 1930s. What is significant about Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*, one production in this genre that posed special problems for the PCA, is that her star persona is called on in the film to suggest something about sexuality that would be taboo in the maternal character she plays. Jacobs argues that the film exploits a division between star and character (for instance, constructing scenes of Dietrich as Helen performing domestic duties juxtaposed to Dietrich as star performing her familiar "deviant" songstress femininity in the "Hot Voodoo" number) to introduce aspects of transgressive femininity not acceptable in the nonspectacle moments of the film (Jacobs, 101–2).

Peter Baxter's chronicle of von Sternberg's relation to Paramount

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Studios and to American culture in the 1930s similarly relies on detailing the production of this same film, and he reveals numerous pieces of evidence about Dietrich's collaborative role with von Sternberg in constructing the narrative and her character in terms of the pair's understanding of maternal melodramatic fantasies (Baxter, *Just Watch*). Janet Staiger, in *Perverse Spectators*, follows the various script versions of the film as it went through the PCA process to argue that despite the PCA-mandated changes evident in the final film, the extratextual material published in fan magazines about not only the studio-PCA negotiations, but most especially about Dietrich's own unconventional relationships with her husband and von Sternberg (resulting in von Sternberg's wife very publicly suing for divorce), suggests that audiences of the time might have still read the film in terms of an unsanctioned transgressive female sexuality. Patrice Petro has critiqued the exclusion (or simplification) of feminist theory's discussion of the film's representation of race, arguing that the meaning of Dietrich's filmic character and her star persona are inflected by Weimar Germany's fascination with an imaginary African American primitivism and the influence of Josephine Baker on Dietrich's performance style. Dietrich's "Hot Voodoo" number and her German character's relationships with American black women in the film suggest to Petro a complex discourse on race and national otherness that exemplifies why *Blonde Venus* and Dietrich need to be considered in terms of hybridity and ambivalence (Petro).

A number of essays in this volume continue and expand on this earlier work focusing on genre, censorship, extratextual materials, and the female sexuality represented by Dietrich's star persona. Mary Beth Haralovich's essay explores how Dietrich's persona contributed to the available meanings of *Blonde Venus* in relation to the film's advertising campaigns in several locales. She argues that while the advertising campaigns for Hollywood films typically conjoin ideologies of courtship, sexual attraction, and love, the campaign strategies for this fallen-woman film were compatible with other extratextual contexts that made room for the film's erotic possibilities. Key to this strategy was a focus on Dietrich's face, inviting contemplation rather than revelation of the narrative's character. Film advertising is an underexplored context in film studies for historicizing meanings of films and star personas, and Haralovich's essay attests again to how Dietrich's persona and films can be used to exemplify the

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

practices of Hollywood film narratives, their audiences, and the industrial practices that produce the former and position the latter. Gaylyn Studlar's essay closely details the contexts of the transformation of Dietrich's star persona in the 1930s, as the filmic characters that were one element of that construction became problematic in shifting social, generic, and industrial environments. One of the central features of the industrial environment that changed from Dietrich's arrival in Hollywood in 1930 to the mid-1930s were the strategies of censorship. Studlar is attentive to the details of how the studios tried to make Dietrich's persona more acceptable to a changed production code and presumedly changed audience by redefining it generically (from the fallen women of *Dishonored* and *Blonde Venus* to the heroines of romantic comedy in *Desire* and *Angel*) and then by the end of the decade by Americanizing her in westerns, such as *Destry Rides Again*, the role that brought her back to box office and critical popularity. The aspects of the Dietrich persona that most attract audiences today, such as her aloofness from her objectified female subjectivity, had to be negotiated, perhaps even threatened with "elimination" by the late 1930s. Mark Williams's essay confirms aspects of Studlar's research, as he traces Dietrich's performances in a series of popular westerns, including *Destry Rides Again*, from 1939 to 1952. Like those in the von Sternberg cycle of texts, these characters are not containable by the generic contexts of marriage. Williams argues that the erotic and social dynamics of the western and its masculine scopic regime require the Dietrich character to submit to generic and male-defined demands of the "law." Like Studlar's essay, Williams's piece examines the construction of Dietrich's star persona outside the usual auteurist contexts, and considers how different generic, historical, and industrial environments contribute to the transformation of the star over time.

Although previous critical work has centralized aspects of Dietrich's physicality—her legs, for instance—in explaining the power of her star persona, several essays in this volume examine her body and voice in terms of their performative manifestation in specific historical moments, media practices, technologies, and acting traditions. Nora Alter's essay on Dietrich's legs examines how this body part most associated with the star's persona and most frequently discussed in ahistorical terms as a fetish might have had particular meanings for audiences in different historical moments. She argues that the typical psychoanalytic understand-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

ing of the fetish replacing the absent phallus in a drama of individual subject formation is inadequate to explain the fascination with Dietrich's legs, which were prominently on display in her live cabaret days in post–World War I Weimar Germany and conspicuously covered by military fatigues in her World War II performances. For Alter, Dietrich's legs have had a "legacy" because of the way they summon a historical referent of dismembered male bodies in wartime. Lutz Koepnick's essay focuses on Dietrich's face as a constituent element in her star persona since the 1930s, when she actively intervened in its transformation and maintenance to increase her market value, but argues that it not so much possesses a content as reveals "the material reality and excessive circulation of signs in modern mass culture." As many critics have done, Koepnick productively places Dietrich's emergence as star in the late 1920s and 1930s in relation to Greta Garbo, the other major European female performer to become a major focus for the energies of the Hollywood studio system and its anciliary industry of fan magazines and glamour portrait photography. However, he argues that Garbo's face suggests the residual place of the silent film aesthetic in the new sound film visual economy, inviting a depth reading. Dietrich's face, on the other hand, resisted reading and thus anticipates the new technologies and economies of circulation of images characteristic of not just the sound film era, but the digital age of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Key to Koepnick's argument about Dietrich's persona (as revealed by the face) is its refusal of authenticity. Amy Lawrence's essay in this volume characterizes Dietrich's voice as rejecting the alleged authenticity of emotion, distinguishing her from emotionally expressive singers such as Judy Garland. The effect of this style is often a self-conscious doubleness, a self-awareness of her status as disciplined performer. Lawrence's argument about Dietrich's persona (as constituted by voice) departs from Koepnick's definition of Dietrich's persona (as constituted by face) in that she demonstrates that the star's emotionally restrained, multilingual persona, suggesting cosmopolitan world-weariness, is "an impenetrable surface" against which her audience speculates, projects, and fantasizes. Lawrence's essay is an especially valuable addition to the scholarship on Dietrich because not only does she analyze an undertheorized component of star performance—voice—but she also examines its performative valence as Dietrich moved into media (stage cabaret in Las Vegas and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

radio) rarely considered to be important in the ongoing construction of film star personas. Steven Bach, in his personal reminiscence about "listening in" on Dietrich's stage rehearsals for a Los Angeles performance in the 1970s, confirms many of Lawrence's conclusions about the effects of Dietrich's voice on radio and recording listeners and their use of it as a "screen" of fantasy projection.

Judith Mayne's essay in this volume is also concerned with the relation of Dietrich's stage performance style to what is almost unanimously considered by scholars (both in and outside this volume) to be Dietrich's ironic, distanced perspective on the conventions of gendered identity construction. Mayne, however, also focuses on some of the very last public performances of Dietrich, in which she also seems to be presenting "her archive," a loose narrative rendering of her past career. Dietrich's aging body is central to her star persona, and Mayne questions the degree to which other archivists have displaced Dietrich's agency by their particular evocation of this body.

Agency in archiving is also a central theme in Lucy Fischer's "Marlene: Modernity, Mortality, and the Biopic," and in the essays in this volume by Amelie Hastie and Mary Desjardins. Fischer discusses *Marlene*, Maximilian Schell's 1983 documentary film of Dietrich in relation to the star's resistance to a voyeuristic gaze on her aged body and her active (although somewhat coerced) participation in analyzing her own image. Hastie, like Fischer and Mayne, is invested in examining to what degree Dietrich's knowledge based on memory and lived experience becomes a central aspect of her star persona in the last half of her life and career. In this regard, Hastie provides the first scholarly analysis of Dietrich's "dictionary" of life, *Marlene Dietrich's ABC*, published in 1960. Like other kinds of star texts (films, biographies, fan magazine articles, and other kinds of promotional materials), *ABC* interpellates a subject desiring to know more, and thus like those other texts, participates in producing the star herself. But Hastie suggests that the singularity of Dietrich's authorial agency lies not in its production of just another star text, but in its relation to subjectivity in modernity, in its similarity to women's advice literature, Roland Barthes *A Lover's Discourse*, and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, as both testament to and hedge against ephemerality. Desjardins examines the continuous posthumous construction of the Dietrich star persona through biographical and autobiographical forms that compete with, confirm, or

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

contradict other media manifestations of her image. Looking specifically at Maria Riva's memoir of her mother, Desjardins suggests that the author is torn between her own longing for a mother-daughter relationship of mutual recognition and an admiration for her mother's disciplined crafting of her own self-mythologization. Since Riva's memoir makes Dietrich accessible through the "family romance" in which the mother, like the star, is a figure inviting an ambivalent affective identification, Desjardins concludes that the form offers a particularly powerful exploration of how star images "haunt" our fantasies.

Creating Dietrichs

Many of the essays in this volume were first presented at a conference held at Dartmouth College in October 2001. As the above outline of these essays indicates, the purpose of this academic event was the critical reviewing of Dietrich from an interdisciplinary vantage point and across numerous fields of inquiry. Yet the Dartmouth event was of course just one of many commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the diva all over the world. Apart from retrospectives, public events, speeches, and celebrations it also occasioned the publication of numerous books on Dietrich, ranging from biographies, homages, and portraits (Bemman, Bosquet, Jacob, Kreuzer and Runge, Salber, Sanders-Brahms, Skaerved, Sudendorf, Wiebrecht, Wood) to books of photography (Nauder and Peter Riva), her correspondence with writer Erich Maria Remarque (Fuld and Schneider) and even a Dietrich cookbook (Weth). The year 2001 clearly underscored that the Dietrich legacy is alive and well, still cherished by her aging fans and ready to be discovered by a younger generation.

These celebrations also made it clear that Dietrich's relationship to Germany and Berlin, which we mapped in some detail earlier, is symptomatic for the larger debate about how Germany ought to remember and confront its postwar legacy. As Werner Sudendorf has said, Dietrich is "a litmus test for how Germans deal with their history" (qtd. in *Vernissage* 7). The shift of sentiment toward Dietrich reflects the complex and contradictory discourses of the last decade on how to evaluate the significance of the past for the present. The example of Dietrich shows signs of genuine reconciliation, but it also indicates that efforts at rehabilitation

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

can easily turn the past into a museum. Politicians and cultural representatives have not been the only ones involved in this effort, nor have they been the most hagiographic or conciliatory, as Wowereit's cautious speech exemplifies. Indeed, some of the ideologically most problematic forms of reclaiming Dietrich have come from fellow artists.

Among these efforts, three plays and one film from the last decade stand out. Pam Gems's play *Marlene* is set in the Paris of the early 1970s, featuring Marlene Dietrich, her tour manager Vivian, and the mute dresser Mutti, apparently a concentration camp survivor, as we witness how the star readies backstage for a concert. Premiered at the Oldham Coliseum Theatre in the United Kingdom in 1996, the play had a short and disappointing run in New York in April 1999. "A moving celebration of the woman behind the myth," as the cover text tells us, *Marlene* focuses on the personal agony behind the ecstatically glossy image. But if the play analyzes the construction of the star, it does so only to laud the sustained discipline and creative efforts that went into it. Featuring many of Dietrich's songs, it offers fans the chance to revisit, or experience for the first time, a glorious moment in the star's career. A far more complex and intriguing look behind the curtains is provided in the personal account of Dietrich's acclaimed biographer Steven Bach, which serves as an overture to this volume.

Interestingly, in Berlin the play has been a tremendous success, with over 250 performances since its 1998 premiere at the Renaissance Theater. In Volker Kühn's German adaptation of Gems's text, the play now revolves around Dietrich's infamous 1960 Berlin concert, climaxing with the performance of several songs, heavily applauded by the audience (in contrast to Gems's version, in which songs pepper the play throughout). Rewriting trauma as triumph, Kühn's *Marlene* has thereby become one of the most startling examples of the effort to normalize the city's relation to the star, providing her with an imaginary homecoming she never received during her lifetime.

Nothing could be further from such a reconciliatory stance than Thea Dorn's play *Marleni: Preussische Diven blond wie Stahl* (Marleni: Prussian Divas Blonde as Steel, 2000). Events are set in the Paris apartment of the diva on the evening prior to her death in May 1992. The play begins with Leni Riefenstahl entering the apartment of the reclusive star through the balcony, to which she had to climb up—as in a mountain film—because

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

the concierge denies entry to anyone wanting to see Dietrich. Riefenstahl has come to cast Dietrich as the heroine in a Penthesilea film, intended to be a comeback for both, the long-blacklisted director and the star who has sunk into oblivion. The bizarre confrontation between the alcoholic Dietrich, severely marked by her advanced age, and the uncannily vigorous Riefenstahl, only one year her junior, is an encounter between colleagues whose political choices drove them apart after 1933, but whose respective afterlives have remarkable similarities, as the title of the play suggests. Dorn's Dietrich insists that "everything in life depends on which war front you spread your legs" (17), but her Riefenstahl counters that the only legs she ever spread at a front were those of her camera tripod. In Dorn's imagined dialogue, Dietrich and Riefenstahl emerge as sisters under the mink, or anorak, whose very different embodiments of the New Woman of Weimar were curtailed by similar concessions to a male-dominated world. If Dietrich was the controlling, manipulative femme fatale, a personality cultivated both on-screen and offscreen, Riefenstahl was the athletic, asexual, and independent actress-director. But both artists, the play insists, had to make heavy sacrifices in order to advance their careers, and the similarity of the sacrifices ultimately outweigh the political differences that lie between them. Further similarity is found in postwar Germany's disavowal of Dietrich as U.S. army slut amd Riefenstahl as mistress of the Führer. The parallelism of *Marleni* calls for a rewriting of both artists' biographies, but with more radical implications for Riefenstahl's. Her postwar blacklisting and continued dismissal as protofascist artist is seen by Dorn as a form of sexism that denies women artistic independence, while Dietrich's fame, the play makes clear, can outlive the star only as long as its true price tag is withheld from the public. (On the similarities between Dietrich and Riefenstahl see also Bronfen 2000, who does not consider Dorn's play.)[8]

Moritz Rinke, *Der graue Engel: Ein Monolog zu zweit* (The Gray Angel: A Monologue for Two, 1995) is a performance piece about "Marlene D" that deconstructs the fetish into which the aging diva has been turned—and turns herself. Set amid the star's arsenal of suitcases that spill the props, dresses, and jewelry accumulated during a lifelong career, we are witness to a monologue in which an angel figure (a human? a mythical figure? the Blue Angel?) talks to her mute *intimus* Konstantin (who is he?) to defy her fear of death and the boredom of a long day ahead. Chal-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl with the American actress Anna May Wong. *Photo by Alfred Eisenstadt/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images.*

lenged to assemble the collage of verbal and gestural quotes that make up the play, the spectator realizes the impossibility of that task, an impossibility that ultimately points to the implosion of the speaking subject and all she stands for. Analytic rather than performative, Judith Mayne's essay in this volume focuses on very similar concerns, namely how the specter of aging—of denying it and negotiating with it, of examining it and running away from it—is dramatically foregrounded during Dietrich's career. Considering not only her film career (most notably her last film, *Just a Gigolo*), but also her career as a chanteuse, as well as Maximilian Schell's famous documentary, Mayne shows how Dietrich's eagerness to control

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

the preservation of her image also bespeaks a passion for storing memories.

The most high-profiled effort to reclaim Dietrich for Germany by streamlining her biography has been Joseph Vilsmaier's big budget biopic *Marlene* (2000), which is dicussed in detail in this volume by Eric Rentschler. As Rentschler shows, Vilsmaier's film suppresses the ambiguities that are the hallmark of Dietrich's stardom, in order to make her into a figure that can heal the open wounds of German history. According to Vilsmaier's version of her life, Marlene's fame precedes her Hollywood career, where she undergoes an Americanization from which she suffers but which never undoes her loyalty to Germany. Her true love is Carl, an entirely fictitious character serving as an officer in the Wehrmacht, whose life Marlene saves by helping him escape from the Americans—betraying the Americans, *not* the Germans. After the war, we find out that Carl was actually in the resistance—as so many Germans would later claim. That the film bombed at the box office indicates that the public upholds certain standards regarding the truthfulness of a celebrity's biography and the rewriting of history, but it also shows that in the relationship between Dietrich and Germany, there's always room for one more embarrassment.

These multiple reworkings of Dietrich are rounded out by two documentaries. Guido Knopp's portrait *Marlene Dietrich: Die Gegnerin* (Marlene Dietrich, the Adversary, 2001) focuses on the star's resistance to Hitler's efforts to lure her back to Germany. As one segment of his five-part television series *Hitlers Frauen und Marlene* (Hitler's Women and Marlene), it contrasts political clear-headedness with those women (some of them artists as well) who actively supported the National Socialists. (See also Knopp's accompanying book.) The portrait *In Her Own Song* (2001) by Dietrich's grandson David Riva provides yet another overview of Dietrich's career, but, like Knopp, with a strong political emphasis. A significant portion of this film deals with the star's support of the U.S. war effort and her strong opposition to Hitler.

This emphasis on the World War II period of Dietrich's life and career is perhaps not surprising considering the documentary's distribution and funding status. It was cofunded and first aired in America by Turner Classic Movies (TCM), a commercial-free television channel offered to cable and satellite subscribers. Television currently rivals the publishing industry as the medium most invested in and profiting from the recirculation of images from World War II and the classical, studio era of Hollywood

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

stardom. In December 2001 TCM capitalized on presumed audience interest in both war and stardom by naming Dietrich its "star of the month" and airing *Dietrich: In Her Own Song* and over a dozen of her films.

This volume of essays contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the Dietrich star persona that has spanned a variety of discursive genres and artistic modes across continents in two different centuries. As our introductory discussion and the volume's essays suggest, one would be hard pressed to point to any other film star whose meaning has had such high stakes for so many cultural projects. Diverse social and cultural agents have and continue to participate in debates around Dietrich, not like the helpless and besotted "moths around the flame" of her most famous song, but as the beneficiaries of the flame's power to illuminate the place of national identity, gender and sexuality, and mass media in modern culture.

Notes

1. Portions of Wowereit's speech are reprinted in Newsletter 40 (31 May 2002) of the Marlene Dietrich Collection Berlin. The newsletters can be found at http://www.mdcb@filmmuseum-berlin.de.

2. Scholarly books focused on a single star include Andrew Britton, *Katharine Hepburn: Star as Feminist*; Paul Smith, *Clint Eastwood: A Cultural Production*; S. Paige Baty, *American Monroe: The Making of a Body Politic*; Ramona Curry, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Mae West as Cultural Icon*; Rachel Moseley, *Growing Up with Audrey Hepburn*; Murray Pomerance, ed., *Enfant Terrible! Jerry Lewis in American Film*; Adrienne L. McLean, *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom*.

3. In *Marlene Dietrich's ABC*, she writes under the entry "Nationality": "Changing your nationality is not an easy step to take, even when you despise the beliefs and actions your country has adopted. Whatever you may tell yourself to the contrary, denying what you were brought up to cherish makes you feel disloyal. The love and respect for the country that is taking you in has nothing to do with it" (120). For a detailed discussions of this book, see Amelie Hastie's essay in this volume.

4. In later years, Dietrich would deny the existence of her sister Elisabeth, although it remains uncertain if this was for political reasons. In his biography, Werner Sudendorf surmises that Marlene kept silent about her older sister to conceal her own age. From 1945 until Elisabeth's death in 1957, Marlene did support her financially (137).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021

5. See also the documentary *Das Zweite Leben der Marlene* (Christian Bauer, 1995), which narrates the story of the Dietrich Archive and its journey to Berlin.

6. At the Potsdamer Platz, one can find Dietrich's Bistro and the Marlene-Bar in the Hotel Inter-Continentel. Elsewhere in Berlin, the restaurant Der Blaue Engel serves dishes made after Dietrich's own recipes and at the Babelsberg Filmstudio the largest studio has been named Marlene-Dietrich-Halle. In Postdam we also find a Marlene-Dietrich-Allee.

7. Some scholars continued into the 1990s using the Dietrich image to exemplify the theoretical implications of Hollywood classical cinema outside particularized historical, industrial, and social contexts. For example, in *Femmes Fatales*, Mary Ann Doane analyzes the use of veils in von Sternberg's imaging of Dietrich to suggest that classical cinema shares with modern philosophy a tendency to project the instabilities of its own discourse onto the figure of the woman (74).

8. In real life, Dietrich and Riefenstahl did not meet after the star's 1930 departure for Hollywood. In a 1987 interview with *Bunte*, a German yellow press journal, Riefenstahl claims to have suggested Dietrich to Sternberg for the part of Lola Lola. Dietrich reacted by cabling *Bunte*: "The Riefenstahl story is so ridiculous that Sternberg and Remarque would have laughed themselves to death if they weren't dead already." In a 1991 letter, Dietrich was asked to meet with Riefenstahl "to clear up a few things, which to the great regret of Leni Riefenstahl might be standing between you and her." Dietrich's sole response was to write "Nazi" on the letter. Dietrich's relation to divas of the Third Reich is also the subject of Elfriede Jelinek's insightful obituary, "Das zweite Gesicht."

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/chapter-pdf/635064/9780822389675-001.pdf by guest on 21 October 2021