



Grace Cunard as criminal gang leader Patsy Montez on the set of *The Purple Mask* (1917). Cunard, who wrote and codirected this film with Francis Ford, is one of many “highly significant early female figures who have received only cursory attention in the histories of cinema.” Photo courtesy Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive

Introduction: Female Stardom and Early Film History

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Designed to explore specific cases of early female stars and the social, industrial, and ideological economies that underwrite the production of the star system, this issue of *Camera Obscura* takes a fresh look at early film history and the creative ventures of women performers. No single concept of stardom animates the essays gathered here; rather the stars discussed operate as figures through which the authors reconceptualize feminist film history and historiography. The inquiries made invite enlargement and reassessment of the subjects film studies deems significant for analysis; the assembled essays present the results of tracking alternative patterns, pathways, and modes of film history.

Cumulatively contributing to what we hope will be a more panoramic view of the period between the early 1910s and the early 1930s, a twenty-year span in which narrative cinema first emerged, flourished, and moved to dominate cinematic production, the essays of this volume reflect a new energy in recent star scholarship even while they explore new modalities for excavating film history. The coextensive emergence of stardom in the period in which narrative film practices were consolidated

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demands careful critical scrutiny. In the pre-sound cinema, stars were particularly vital anchor points when individual films did not necessarily linger long in the public imagination. Moreover, the unruly realism attributed to early cinema stars may have worked as a necessary counterweight to the continuity and standardization of film language and the formulaic nature of cinema fictions. Importantly, a focus on stars directs our attention to the international lexicon through which narrative cinema generated a vast filmgoing constituency. A fuller appreciation of the densely woven connections between film text and star text is crucial to feminist recovery of obscure figures and to the rereading of well-recognized ones. A number of the essays here focus upon highly significant early female figures who have received only cursory attention in the histories of cinema, including stunt star Pearl White, the iconic French performer Musidora, the imported European vamp Pola Negri, the flapper heroine Colleen Moore, and the Chinese star Xuan Jinglin. Other essays revisit canonical stars such as Mary Pickford and Greta Garbo, whose stardom appeared to be self-evident but proves more complex than previous accounts have suggested.

A foundational premise of this volume is that the critical analysis of stardom should not be considered a separate branch of work in film studies, but rather a fully integrated, indeed necessary and inevitable component of any efforts to understand aesthetic, industrial, and ideological film history. Accordingly, several of the essays here bear evidence of a methodological shift away from the analysis of a single star persona and its operations in accordance with Richard Dyer's famous formulation of the star text as a "structured polysemy."¹ For instance, Lucy Fischer's essay, "Greta Garbo and Silent Cinema: The Actress as Art Deco Icon," broadens the traditional mandate of a "star study" by reading the star text of Greta Garbo in conjunction with the emergence of the Art Deco design style, forcefully establishing that the license and sophistication associated with Garbo were often contextualized within a highly functional Deco *mise-en-scène*. Fischer finds a mutually explanatory relationship between Deco exoticism and modern female eroticism, one that served simultaneously to aes-

theticize and gender new conceptions of modernity. It is, in fact, the very axiom of modern subjectivity that Jennifer M. Bean investigates in “Technologies of Early Stardom and the Extraordinary Body.” For Bean, the wide range of female star personae constructed in the period between 1912 and 1920 exemplify an economy of “danger” and “catastrophe” that systematically destabilizes cinema’s increasingly regulated visual field. In her study, “star discourse” emerges as a technology built to counter “film discourse.” The phenomenology of performance through which the former is calibrated provides, she argues, alternative historical and conceptual schemas for conceiving the relation between women and machines, as well as traditional accounts of identity more broadly. The concern of industrial modernity and its relation to film performance is also, significantly, the pivotal hinge that Zhang Zhen examines in “*Amorous History of the Silver Screen: The Actress as Vernacular Embodiment in Early Chinese Cinema.*” By reading the Shanghai film industry’s self-reflexive commentary on its “silent” history through the 1932 film *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen* [*Yinmu yanshi*], Zhang’s methodology proves not only capable of reflecting the multiple semiotics generated through women’s encounters with film technology, but of being alert to the congruencies—and lack thereof—between the Eastern and Western worlds’ experiences of a modernized urban landscape.

The methodological choices made in these pages provocatively signal alternative modes of conceiving “stardom.” In so doing, they mark the history of stardom as a salient field for contemporary film feminism. To be sure, feminist historians, among them Miriam Hansen and Gaylyn Studlar, have already engaged early stardom in productive ways, notably by directing their attention to the construction of male star personae.² The essays collected here demonstrate the usefulness of undertaking similarly fully contextualized readings of female star personae.

What might be called the “traditional” field of star scholarship—albeit a tradition with a rather young life—has, on the whole, proved more limited in its attention to gender. For all its rich insights, the earliest scholarship on stardom often seemed to hold stars at a certain remove from the industry whose interests

they were designed to carry. The essays here certainly do attend to the ways that stars “embody in their images certain paradoxes or contradictions inherent in the larger social formation.”³ Indeed, all of the analyses to follow reflect in various ways upon stars who communicated both the logic and illogic of structuring relations between the subject and modernity, the subject and capitalism, the subject and whiteness, the subject and adulthood, and other decisive social terms. Yet the use value of stardom exceeds this in many ways, and in our efforts to harmonize “star studies” with other modes of film scholarship, we seek to illustrate how what we know about stars may recast what we think we know about cinema, gender, and the early twentieth century.

Along with a kind of focalized interest in new forms of historiography, these essays hold in common three important elements. The first element is methodological, involving a mode of response to the difficulties of reconstructing a star persona in the absence of many (or even all) of the films in which the star appeared. A salient feature of these essays is their resourcefulness in reading nonfilmic materials as repositories of information, particularly in the absence of a filmic record of performance. Indeed, as Amelie Hastie’s article, “History in Miniature: Colleen Moore’s Dollhouse and Historical Recollection,” demonstrates, there are compelling questions to be asked about the activities and enterprises carried out in the “afterlife” of stardom. Hastie’s analysis largely moves away from the filmic record of Moore’s performances, turning instead to the way that the star (in what might be called her “post-peak” phase) maintained a drawing power sufficient to motivate another kind of public consumption—the traveling exhibition of her famous dollhouse (notably, though not exclusively, during the Great Depression years). For Hastie, the collection activities that produced the luxurious dollhouse generated an accessible, pleasurable metaphor for the increasingly remote years of Jazz Age Hollywood. The broad theoretical reach of Hastie’s argument might well invite attention to the extended forms of ancillary consumption more and more associated with contemporary stardom.

The second interest that threads through the essays is with the nature and function of the star body; for many of the authors in this issue, crucial meanings resonate through the corporeal effects of performance. More than simply concretizing histories of film performance, these essays question the very materiality of the filmic body. Thus certain essays investigate physically proactive stars such as the serial stunt queens or Musidora, while others look to understand the transgressive torpor of languorous vamp stars like Pola Negri, whose bodily performativity refused to confirm the energies of American capitalism. Questions about the form and function of the star body catalyze the discussion by Bean and that by Vicki Callahan in her essay “Screening Musidora: Inscribing Indeterminacy in Film History.” Callahan reads the black-bodysuit-clad Musidora as a forceful image of the very openness of early cinema and the role of the spectator within it. Part of what emerges in these opening two essays is the way that concern with the star body may be extended to the body of the spectator. Both Bean and Callahan emphatically underscore the complexity of cinema’s intertextual system of signification, showing how meanings never containable by a film text may play out in the affective register of film spectatorship. In a similar vein, Zhang Zhen’s essay shows how star bodies in the early Chinese film industry worked to secure a relationship to the screen that encoded the promise of liberation and social mobility for the spectator.

The third major area of overarching interest is the relation of the female star to dichotomies of girlishness and adulthood. Many of the essays here direct attention toward changing cultural definitions of femininity and the functional uses of the categories “girl” and “woman.” For stars whose femininity was deemed “adult,” maturity might be figured in terms of an inescapable historical inheritance. In the essay “Immigrant Stardom in Imperial America: Pola Negri and the Problem of Typology,” I consider how the European sophistication of Negri always ran on a parallel track with a primitivized sexuality, creating a dichotomized identity consistent with an American view of Europe as simultaneously

exalted and debased. Most crucially, Negri embodied a version of New Womanhood grounded not in the girlishness of the flapper, but in a threatening adult femininity.

Other stars, such as Colleen Moore and Mary Pickford, whose stardom involved a complex encounter with the dynamics of miniaturization, raise resonant questions about the uses of girlishness. Gaylyn Studlar's "Oh, 'Doll Divine': Mary Pickford, Masquerade, and the Pedophilic Gaze" addresses the "child-woman" status of the beloved star known as "Our Little Mary," finding that the adult actress's masquerade of childishness crucially undercut any potential for sexual subjectivity. Still sexually objectified, the Pickford persona, which was strongly anchored in the portrayal of waifs and hoydens, appealed to and through a cultural pedophilia that used the child-woman to personify nostalgic ideals of femininity that offset the ascendancy of the New Woman.

In their attention to the operative distinctions between girlish femininity and adult femininity, these essays complicate the kind of binary logic that has so often driven contemporary film feminism—finding that there is no singular "femininity" that corresponds with an essential "masculinity," but rather that there are many shades and variations of maturity in the codification of femininity driving early Hollywood film and film culture. The authors here insist that femininity is nowhere monolithic in its construction in cinema.

Taken as a whole, this issue marks a concerted shift in conceptualizations of early cinematic history and the place of stardom within them. At the same time, these histories hold interesting implications for thinking about the present cinematic moment. Contemporary stardom would appear to be subject to a number of destabilizing factors that link the current moment to the early years of the twentieth century. Just as at the turn of the last century, at the turn of the new millennium new forms of tabloid stardom have produced female stars with an inherent disposability—"Survivor" stars or "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire" stars—or new forms of cipher-like malleability, as in the digital stardom of figures like Lara Croft.⁴ Similarly, the early decades of the twenti-

eth century produced stars who did not merely drift through the public imagination, but anchored and exposed its workings. The assembled essays of *Camera Obscura* 48 offer evidence of the spectrum and scope of the vibrant critical enterprises that engage stardom in contemporary film studies.

Notes

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1. See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979) and *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).
2. See Miriam Hansen's essay "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship," in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 259–82; and Studlar's *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).
3. Robert C. Allen, "The Role of the Star in Film History (Joan Crawford)," in *Film Theory and Criticism*, 5th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 560.
4. See Mary Flanagan, "Mobile Identities, Digital Stars, and Post-Cinematic Selves," *Wide Angle* 21.1 (1999): 76–93.