

## A STAR IS BORN AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AUTHENTICITY

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This chapter deals with a narrow – but crucial – aspect of the film *A Star is Born*, namely, the notion and construction of ‘authenticity’. The processes of authentication discussed are the guarantee of both star ‘quality’ in general and of the particular image of the star concerned.

It is easy enough to outline the components of Judy Garland’s star image in terms of social meanings. I only have to refer the stages in her career to three different stereotypes – the all-American small town girl-next-door; the personification of showbiz good humour and bezazz; the neurotic woman – for you to pick up on the social resonances of her image. If we wanted to understand the specificity of the image and account for its particular appeal and purchase, we could look closer at the precise inflection her image gives to those stereotypes, their place in the wider cultural discourses of the period and the different concerns of the different known Garland audiences. We could begin to see why people paid to go and see her, and to differentiate between the various meanings that could be found in her image.

Yet none of this quite seems to deliver an understanding of the most common-sensical notions attached to the words ‘star’ and ‘charisma’ – notions like magic, power, fascination, and also authority, importance and aura. Part of the answer lies in the precise and differentiated relation between the values perceived to be embodied by the star and the perceived status of those values (especially if they are felt to be under threat or in crisis, or to be challenging received values, or else to be values that are a key to understanding and coping with contemporary life). But I also want to suggest that all of this depends on the degree to which stars are accepted as truly being what they appear to be.

There is a whole other way of relating to stars, a way that is essentially deconstructive, that refuses the guarantee that appearances are not deceiving. The most widespread, habitual form of such deconstructive reading practice is camp. Garland’s relation to this, a phenomenon deeply rooted

in male gay culture, is particularly paradoxical, considering that she is, and precisely in her authenticity, a key icon of traditional gay male culture.<sup>1</sup>

There is a whole litany in the fan literature surrounding stars in which certain adjectives endlessly recur – sincere, immediate, spontaneous, real, direct, genuine and so on. All of these words can be seen as relating to a general notion of ‘authenticity’. It is these qualities that we demand of a star if we accept her or him in the spirit in which she or he is offered. Outside of a camp appreciation, it is the star’s really seeming to be what she/he is supposed to be that secures his/her star status, ‘star quality’ or charisma. Authenticity is both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular values a star embodies (such as girl-next-door-ness, etc.). It is this effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma, and that is what I want to look at here.

But first we need to consider the peculiarity that authenticity should be so crucial a notion in the whole phenomenon. The vocabulary of immediacy, sincerity, believability and so on is so familiar – since we also use it of people we encounter in life – that its particularity may not necessarily strike us. Yet it seems clear that it is a vocabulary of little more than two or three hundred years existence (or rather, this way of using these words is only that old, the words themselves being much older). The peculiarity of this use of these words is their application to individual persons as the criteria for the truth or validity of social affairs. To put it another way, the truth of social affairs has become rooted not in general criteria governing social behaviour itself but in the performers themselves and, at the same time, the criteria governing performance have shifted from whether the performance is well done to whether it is truthful, that is, true to the ‘true’ personality of the performer. (I mean performer here in both its theatrical and its sociological usages.) Even truth is a peculiar criterion – we no longer ask if someone performs well or according to certain moral precepts but whether what they perform is truthful, with the referent of truthfulness not being falsifiable statements but the person’s ‘person’.

This development, charted by Richard Sennett in his book *The Fall of Public Man*, is essential to the development of humanism and individualism. All the major discourses of contemporary western society address themselves to people as individuals, as free and separate human beings who are, in their separateness, the source of all social arrangements. Once individuals, in this sense, become the pivot of the whole ensemble of discourses that make sense of society, it is not surprising that it comes to matter very much whether those individuals are indeed functioning as they appear to be. If the individual is the guarantor of the social order, then he or she must be worthy of that role. Hence – to take one striking example – the enormous moral fervour surrounding lying; taken by the west as an absolute moral wrong, its acceptance as morally useful in many

societies baffles us. We are hardly able to think about another's statements without first determining whether the person really does mean what she/he says (and not whether it is right, or expedient, or formally correct, or kind).

Yet just at the point that this way of ordering and understanding human discourse and intercourse establishes itself as the fundament of human affairs, the possibility, and then probability, that what people say is *not* what they mean becomes ever more clear, and disturbing. The major trends within western culture that are hailed as intellectual revolutions have all done their bit to dislodge the security with which the individual holds her/his place as the guarantor of discourse. Marxism (at any rate in its most widely understood form) proposes that the political activity of society, in the form of freely operating spokespersons freely elected by society at all, which on the contrary resides in the invisible operation and structures of the means and forces of production and reproduction. The behaviourisms propose that what we appear to do freely for reasons of which we are conscious we actually do for reasons that are barely available to consciousness at all, drives and instincts. Psychoanalysis equally proposes that consciousness is not really consciousness, but a surface masking the workings of that consciousness below consciousness that we choose to call unconscious. And some forms of linguistics, and aesthetic modernism associated with them, insist that we do not speak language but that it speaks us, that the individual, far from being the guarantor of discourse, is in fact the product of it. I have sketched in these discourses at the level of their theoretical articulation, but they inform all levels of discourse, to varying degrees and in varying forms. Everyone is familiar with the notions that what we do, say, think and feel, and what happens in the world, are not due to us as we know ourselves but to economic forces, instincts, unconscious motivations, habits and patterns of speech. Two historical developments have further endangered the notion of the individual – the development of the mass media (and in particular advertising, both in itself and as an economic concomitant of commercial radio, television and journalism) and the rise of totalitarianisms (Nazism, Stalinism etc.). The reigning concept behind both of these is that of 'manipulation', of the handling of human discourse and intercourse such as to yield vast profits and despotic power, on the one hand, and a docile populace on the other. (This is not the place to enter into discussion of the validity of notions of mass culture, totalitarianism and manipulation, though we should recognise how deeply problematic they are; what is at issue here is their widespread currency as indicators of the characteristic form of social relations in the 'developed' countries.)

Much of the internal intellectual history of Marxism, behaviourism, psychoanalysis, linguistics and modernism has been the attempt to rec-

oncle their paradigms with those of humanism. I do not propose to go into that here. What is particularly fascinating about the mass media and totalitarianism is that, even as they are being identified as destroying the individual, they are also largely in the business of promoting the individual and the claims of humanism. To get back to stars, no aspect of the media can be more obviously attended by hype than the production of stars; there is nothing sophisticated about knowing they are manufactured and promoted, it is a sense that is common. Even the media knows it, as films like *A Star is Born* show. Yet in the very same breath as audiences and producers alike acknowledge stars as hype, they are declaring this or that star as the genuine article. Just as the media are construed as the very antithesis of sincerity and authenticity, they are the source for the presentation of the epitome of those qualities, the true star.

How does the star image pull this off? How is the image authenticated as something more – truer, more real – than an image? In part, the star phenomenon is defined by an in-built means of authentication. Stars appear before us in media texts – films, advertisements, gossip columns, television interviews and so on – but unlike other forms of representation stars do not only exist in media texts. To say that stars exist outside of the media texts in real life would be misleading, but stars are carried in the person of people who do go on living away from their appearances in the media, and the point is that we know this. When he got home John Wayne may have become Marion Morrison again, but there was a real human being with a continuous existence, that is, who existed in between all the times he was 'being' John Wayne. But there is no way in which Elizabeth Bennett can leave the pages of *Pride and Prejudice* (except to be referred to in other media texts, in parodies, speculative continuations of the story, adaptations etc.). In the first place then the question of the star's authenticity can be referred back to her/his existence in the real world.

This referral-back is tied up with the fact that stars exist in photographic media. Stars are a particular instance of the supposed relation between a photograph and its referent. A photograph is always a photograph of something or somebody who had to have been there in order for the photograph to be taken. In the light of my remarks above, it is symptomatic that one of the best-known saws about photography is that 'the camera never lies'. The spread of photography as a casual practice has no doubt severely dented the confidence with which the camera's truth is believed: few people are the naive realists that theory refutes. Yet the residual sense of the subject or person having-been-there remains powerful. Joan Crawford is not just a representation done in paint or writing – she is carried in the person née Lucille Le Sueur who went before the cameras to be captured for us.

And if the existential bond (the indexicality, in C. S. Peirce's terminology) between Crawford and Crawford/Le Sueur in the movie or pin-

up is perceived to be distorted (deauthenticated) by the manipulation of the film-making or photographic process (glamour lighting, clever editing and so on), then we can always go and get photos of her doing the chores at home and cuddling baby Christina. And if we think these activities are a put-up job, then we might get a candid camera shot of her without make-up, or uncover a snapshot of her scowling at Christina. And so on in an infinite regress by means of which one more authentic image displaces another. But then they are all part of the star image, each one anchoring the whole thing in an essential, uncovered authenticity, which can then be read back into the performances, the roles, the pin-ups.

There is no need for what-is-uncovered to corroborate the particular character traits incarnated at the most obvious and familiar level of the star's image. In the development of the star phenomenon in Hollywood the attempt to make the different levels mutually reinforcing was certainly strenuously made – until the manipulations of that became so widely known that sources not apparently identified with Hollywood became the privileged access to the star's 'real' personality. Hence the growth of scandal magazines, unauthorised biographies, candid camera photo-journalism and so on.

The growth of this aspect of the total star text (i.e. as read across all her/his different media manifestations) draws on one possible way of taking the implications of Marxism, linguistics and, most explicitly, psychoanalysis and behaviourism. These displace the individual as the guarantor of discourse, but they do posit – or can be read as positing – a 'real' that is beneath or behind the surface represented by 'the individual' as a discursive category. Indeed, many of the claims of these theoretical discourses on our attention has been in their assertion of revealing a, or the, truth behind appearances, stripping away the veil of bourgeois categories or civilised (repressed) behaviours. The basic paradigm is just this – that what is behind or below the surface is, unquestionably and virtually by definition, the truth. Thus features on stars which tell us that the star is *not* like he or she appears to be on screen serve to reinforce the authenticity of the star image as a whole. And, very often, films made subsequent to a particular exposé will incorporate the truth revealed by the exposé as part of the authentication of the star in her/his next film.

At this point the authentication afforded by the ambivalent star-as-image:star-as-real-person nexus resembles nothing so much as a hall of mirrors. Not every case is so complicated. Many star images were authenticated by showing that the star really was like he or she was on the screen. In other cases, the off-screen reputation is either suppressed (as in the endless word of mouth about which indelibly heterosexual love gods and goddesses were in reality gay) or just does not get widely incorporated into the image's popular currency (e.g. every interview and biography assures us that James Cagney was of a gentle and kindly disposition, but

it seems to have had no impact on his image). But the full complexity of the potential inter-relationships is illustrated by the career of Judy Garland. For instance, at the end of her career *I Could Go On Singing*, drawing on all the publicity surrounding her problems, offers itself as a guaranteed authentic portrait, and retrospectively, with the knowledge of her experiences as a child and adolescent at MGM, the films of the forties can be re-read for signs of disturbance and neurosis. Thus there is a constant play of authenticating levels in the process of reading the image at different points in time. *A Star is Born* is probably most complex in this regard, since it clearly reworks the MGM Garland image (in notions of innate talent, in various details of dress and performance recalling the innocent girl-next-door of the early films and in the films-within-the-film which, as Wade Jennings points out, resemble nothing so much as the kind of big production number MGM put Garland into in the forties).<sup>2</sup> Yet it seems also to incorporate into it oblique reference to the difficult years immediately preceding it (e.g., as Jennings suggests, in transferring the Garland career to the Mason character) and can also be read, particularly in terms of Garland's performance style, for signs (not hard to find) of what we are pleased to label neurosis.

So far all I have said is still rooted in the basic fact of the star phenomenon, that star images are carried in the person of real people. But it is also clear that this is unstable. Corroboration that a star is really like she/he appears to be *may* work, but may be read as further manipulation; showing that the star is not really like she/he appears to be *may* itself be taken up into the image, its further construction and rereading, but it could shatter the illusion altogether. There is more to authentication – there is a rhetoric of authenticity. This too has its own in-built instability – yesterday's markers of sincerity and authenticity are today's signs of hype and artifice. Nevertheless it is a powerful rhetoric so long as it is not perceived as a rhetoric.

I am not concerned here to try to establish the particular codes of authenticity that were current at given points in time. What interests me here are the reigning notions that inform the shifting rhetorical strategies. Authenticity is established or constructed in media texts by the use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premediation and privacy. These return us to notions of the truth being behind or beneath the surface. The surface is organised and under control, it is worked out in advance, it is public. In terms of performance this would mean that every detail is marked as deliberate and calculated; in terms of narrative it would mean that all the actions that really matter are set in the public domain. This kind of performance and this kind of narrative are, needless to say, just what we don't get when authenticity is at stake.

Much of the effort of a film must be the deployment of markers of authenticity to buoy up the unstable authenticity of the star; and this

becomes still more so when the film is about the phenomenon of stardom. Few treatments of stardom are in fact as naive as the title *A Star is Born* suggests. The Cukor-Garland film repeatedly indicates that stars are made by elaborate processes of production and manufacture; the extended 'Born in a Trunk' number is about the fact that being born in a trunk is not being born a star. Yet while it is acknowledging the constructedness of stars, it is also wishing to assert that stars are real, that this star, anyhow (whether we're thinking of her as Esther Blodgett, Vicki Lester or Judy Garland) is authentic. The whole film shifts between acknowledging manufacture as the rule and asserting the authenticity of this particular case.

The crucial moment of this assertion of authenticity is the 'The Man That Got Away' number. We must be convinced by this number that Esther really has 'star quality'; if this does not convince us, everything that follows suggests that her rise to stardom is just hype.

It may establish authenticity just by being Garland's big solo – it may be enough that it is Garland. Done in one long take, it may be accepted as capturing the continuousness of her performance which we may already think of as 'authentic' (the Bazinian notion of the realism of the long take may be pertinent here). But the number is too crucial to the film to rest on that.

The number is located (by what is in fact a false point-of-view) as seen by James Mason (Norman Maine) and followed by his declaration that she has that 'little something extra' that is star quality. He looks at and appraises her, sober (for the first time so far in the film) and without lust (his usual mode of looking, as the previous scene establishes) – his judgement is signalled as unfulfilled and disinterested, therefore more authoritative. He is himself a star, as well as a more fully established character in the film than is Esther/Garland at this point. For these reasons, he may be taken as the voice of truth. If he says she's a star, then she is. Still – this is not sure. He is hardly what we would call a reliable witness on the strength of what we have seen so far.

The film has to marshal markers of authenticity. *Lack of control*: several of Garland's gestures and facial (particularly mouth) expressions are redundant in terms of directly expressing or underlining the words or musical phrases of the song; such gestures are habitually read as neurotic (I'm sorry to keep using this word so lightly, but equally endlessly putting inverted commas around it is tedious – I intend neurosis as a socially constructed category) and her off-screen image by 1956 would have made such a reading easy. (For example, she brushes a lock of hair off her forehead after bringing her hand to her throat on the words, 'No more that all time thrill'; but her hair is cropped, there is no lock on it; it is redundant as a practical gesture, but indecipherable as an expressive one, except as a gesture that can be taken to 'betray' neurosis.) *Unpremeditated*: other gestures, together with the opening 'doo doo' and the raised eyebrow

on the final piano phrase followed by a satisfied laugh, seem to be called forth by the music, to be improvised. She and the other musicians have already been described as jazz musicians, thus linking them to a music tradition that is assumed to be based on unpremeditated musical expressivity (it is assumed that improvisations in jazz just happen, immediate and spontaneous, unrehearsed); and behind that, there is the link with black culture, which has always functioned as a marker of authenticity and naturalness in white discourses. *Private*: she and the band do not know that they are being observed, that they are on. The dark lighting and the close grouping that the moving camera continually reframes both connote intimacy, not public performance. In all these ways, the number is overdetermined in terms of authenticity.

No number, no scene in a film, can guarantee that it will be read in the way it intends or 'prefers'. The reframing camera which keeps Esther/Garland in the centre *may* remind us that this is a performance for us; that Garland knows we are looking even if Esther doesn't know that Norman is. It is only a step from this to reminding ourselves that this could well be the twentieth take, which scotches the notions of unpremeditated, unrehearsed performance. And so on. But this is to deconstruct the film in the process of viewing, to see the markers of authenticity as markers. It is to go against the grain of the number, and the film.

One of the curious things about this number is that the song does not refer to anything that has happened so far in the film, and it seems to stretch a point to suggest that it refers forward to Norman's suicide. One could see it as referring to Garland's life, her previous marriages and affairs; and this is the resonance the song acquired as she used it in subsequent concert appearances. Yet this was never so insistent a part of her neurotic image as the legacy, in the form of pills and alcohol, of her years as a child star in Hollywood. The authenticity the number is after really has nothing to do with what Esther/Garland is singing about – it is the authenticity of her capacity to sing that is at stake. We must know that her star quality has nothing to do with recording techniques, with mechanical reproduction (even though what we are watching is perforce a recording), but is grounded in her own immediate (= not controlled), spontaneous (= unpremeditated) and essential (= private) self. That guarantees that her stardom is not a con, because an authenticated individual is acting as the guarantor of the truth of the discourse of her stardom. By not having a direct emotional referent, the number reinforces the authenticity of the star quality that can *then* legitimate the authenticity of whatever particular emotions Esther/Vicki will be called upon to express. In this way, the number is an especially interesting indicator of the processes of the authentication of star quality.

## NOTES

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1 See R. Dyer, 'Judy Garland and gay men', in *Heavenly Bodies* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 141-94.

2 Wade Jennings, 'Nova: Garland in *A Star is Born*', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Summer 1979, 321-37.

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## FEMININE FASCINATIONS

### Forms of identification in star-audience relations

Jackie Stacey

#### THE LOST AUDIENCE

Throughout this book – as throughout most film studies – the audience has been conspicuous by its absence. In talking of manipulation . . . consumption . . . ideological work . . . subversion . . . identification . . . reading . . . placing . . . and elsewhere, a concept of audience is clearly crucial, and yet in every case I have had to gesture towards this gap in our knowledge, and then proceed as if this were *merely* a gap. But how to conceptualise the audience – and the empirical adequacy of one's conceptualisations – is fundamental to every assumption one can make about how stars and films work.<sup>1</sup>

My mother obtained a job at the State cinema when I was ten. For me that meant a ticket to Paradise, and regularly I worshipped at the shrine of the gods and goddesses. I couldn't wait for the moment to come when the velvet curtains would sweep apart, the lights dim, and a shared intimacy would settle on the hushed audience. (D. H.)

The first quotation is taken from the conclusion of Richard Dyer's study on stars, the second is written by a film fan remembering the pleasures offered by Hollywood stars in the 1940s and 1950s. Since the publication of *Stars* in 1982 there has been little work to fill the gap referred to in Dyer's conclusion. It is particularly important for feminists to challenge the absence of audiences from film studies, since it has reproduced an assumed passivity on the part of women in the cinema audience. Wanting to find out about female audiences and their relationship to stars, I advertised in two of the leading women's weekly magazines for readers to write to me about their favourite Hollywood star of the forties and the fifties. These decades interested me since much feminist work on Hollywood has