

INTRODUCTION

This anthology offers a guide to studying the stars and the phenomenon of stardom. Its concern is not individual stars but the cultural and theoretical issues stars raise, although particular stars feature as examples. These are largely American because Hollywood has established the dominant paradigm of both mainstream cinema and stardom. However, Behroze Gandhi and Rosie Thomas' work on Indian stars highlights both the separate identity of other world cinemas and the national specificity of Hollywood.

The hegemony of Hollywood is also a reason for the almost exclusive focus on *film* stars. Yet stardom arose in the theatre before burgeoning in the cinema, a relation discussed in a number of these essays. Latterly, with the break up of the studio system and the emergence of the star as independent producer, freer to choose roles and focus on acting rather than image, the production of the bezazz and gossip of stardom appears to have passed from the cinema to the music industry or sports world. However, as Kobena Mercer's closing analysis of Michael Jackson's pop video, *Thriller*, suggests, while other entertainment industries may manufacture stars, cinema still provides the ultimate confirmation of stardom. So it is argued, the very different forms of television produce personalities not stars; to achieve stardom means breaking out of the medium. Nevertheless, as David Lusted shows, television circulates and elaborates star personae who originate in other entertainment fields.¹

The star challenges analysis in the way it crosses disciplinary boundaries: a product of mass culture, but retaining theatrical concerns with acting, performance and art; an industrial marketing device, but a signifying element in films; a social sign, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values, which expresses the intimacies of individual personality, inviting desire and identification; an emblem of national celebrity, founded on the body, fashion and personal style; a product of capitalism and the ideology of individualism, yet a site of contest by marginalised groups; a figure consumed for his or her personal life, who competes for allegiance with statesmen and politicians. Not all these facets can be equally represented in an anthology of necessity

limited as to length and cost. The major emphasis of this selection is the role of stars in the production, circulation and negotiation of meanings, identities, desires, and ideologies. Other areas of interest such as theatrical stardom, fashion, national stars, performance and kinesics, television personality—which receive limited attention here—may be followed up through the bibliography.

A decade has passed since the publication of Richard Dyer's *Stars* which laid the groundwork for star analysis within film studies.² Till then, work on stars had been largely the province of fandom on the one hand or of sociology on the other. While the one focused on personal biographies, the other took stars as industrial marketing devices or social role models—a means of creating and organising audiences and disseminating stereotypes. Film criticism acknowledged the role of the star in films only rarely, generally in connection with genre (the western and John Wayne) or with a director (John Ford and John Wayne). Richard Dyer's approach, combining semiotics and sociology, introduced the notion of the *star text*. He analyses the star image as an intertextual construct produced across a range of media and cultural practices, capable of intervening in the working of particular films, but also demanding analysis as a text in its own right. While semiotics provides methods for analysing such 'texts', sociology asks how they function in society. Thus study of stars becomes an issue in the social production and circulation of meaning, linking industry and text, films and society.

Such issues were consolidated in the seventies under the rubric of cultural studies which responded to and fed an increasing awareness within subordinated cultures of the political significance of representation. In this perspective, stars personalise social meanings and ideologies. Actors become stars when their off-screen life-styles and personalities equal or surpass acting ability in importance. Stardom enacts the power and material success of individual lives. Thus stars are implicated in the critique of individualism, consumerism, and social stereotyping; they become an object of cultural politics.

Such a politics, however, cannot neglect the meanings and pleasures that stars hold out to their audiences. Richard Dyer's work offered two routes into the cultural complexity of stars. If star images relate to social meanings and values, this relation is not one of simple reflection or reproduction. Textual analysis shows how star images reconcile, mask, or expose ideological contradictions. However, the premiss that such images are intertextual and contradictory opens up the possibility for divergent or oppositional readings by different audiences.

Dyer's work on stars coincided with a period of growing interest in psychoanalytic approaches to the cinema, which produced quite a different

conception of stars and of their textual and ideological effects. Cinepsychoanalysis is concerned with the source of cinema's fascination for audiences, and in particular with the interrelation of psychic and cinematic mechanisms of identification. In this respect, it introduced into star analysis the fundamental issue of desire and pleasure, attempting to answer the question ignored by traditional economic analyses as to *why* stars have the power to sell goods and films. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, it propounded a homology between the construction of the gendered human subject in language and the 'ideal' spectator of narrative film. Both processes involve identification with human figures—parents and stars. Both, through mechanisms of fetishism and voyeurism, produce apparently coherent, complete and fixed identities through the denial of *difference*—that 'otherness' which femininity, ethnicity or divergent sexualities enact for white, patriarchal society. Such identificatory figures also deny the fact of *process*, whereby meanings and identities are never fixed but in constant flux. In this analogy a film's 'ideal spectator' is a masculine construct, offering identification with the male star as a narrative position of illusory mastery; the female star, as object of the cinematic gaze, is reduced to a male fetish.³

For cinepsychoanalysis the culturalist argument that stars become stars because they *mean* something to their audiences sidesteps their ideological nature as mechanisms of identification and neglects the complex subjective processes involved in the production of meaning. From this perspective, the fragmentary, extra-cinematic circulation of the star image acts as an inducement to the consumption of films for their promise to the viewer of completion both of star image and self image through the structure of identification offered by classic narrative. Thus the differences between stars which interest the cultural analyst of social meanings are, as in earlier critiques of mass culture, conceived as marketing devices, enticing audiences to return to the same old scenario of patriarchal subjecthood and bourgeois consumption.⁴

The cultural politics which arose with the various liberation movements of the sixties and onward has been ambivalent about the political effectivity of stars. Some feminists, for example, have found that by virtue of their public prominence and economic power women stars, particularly in the thirties and forties, appeared to offer positive figures of identification. Feminist critics like Molly Haskell argued that such strong, independent female images overrode repressive narrative resolutions and debates arose over the degree to which star figures could be reappropriated to serve politicised imaginations.⁵ On the other hand, the female star who inevitably becomes a focus of visual pleasure for an apparently masculine spectator appears the epitome of the male fetish.

However, against the rejection of the star as a patriarchal construct, groups hardly yet represented—gays and blacks, for example—demand images that recognise marginalised social existences and that offer affirmative identities and fantasies. Moreover, as Jackie Stacey points out, feminists confront a dilemma when considering the popular female audience whose pleasurable identifications with a female star theorised as fetish or voyeuristic object must be counted either narcissistic or masochistic.

By the end of the seventies an impasse appeared to have arisen between a culturalist approach concerned with the social circulation of meanings and identities as ‘social facts’, analysable for their contradictory ideological effects, and a psychoanalytic concern with the unconscious yet formative processes which underlie such meanings and identities, determining their subjective effects.⁶

This collection, while anthologising a few exemplary pieces from earlier debates, largely represents later developments. These suggest that the impasse of the early 1980s is in the process of breaking up as sociological, semiotic and psychoanalytic approaches begin to inform each other, recasting the object of study and the terms of analysis. Major developments in film history, audience research, and the theorisation of feminine subjectivity have contributed to this rapprochement.

The anthology is organised in four parts: *The system; Stars and society; Performers and signs; and Desire, meaning and politics*. These headings represent emphases in approach and focus, not rigid demarcations. The increasing impossibility of separating industry and text, economics and aesthetics, sociology and semiotics, cultural politics and psychoanalysis and all these from history is demonstrated in the overlaps between issues raised across sections. Articles within sections are organised so as to point towards succeeding issues.

The focus of *Part I: The system* is the economic and institutional base of Hollywood stardom. However, the opening essays on the origins of the star system by Janet Staiger and Richard de Cordova raise questions of historiography and cultural context. Whereas traditional film histories stress cinematic specificity and innovation, Staiger and de Cordova consider the complex interaction of economic motives and existing cultural practices in the formation of the star system, in particular its relation to theatrical stardom, the acting profession and the middle-class audiences cinema sought to win.

Exploitation and fabrication are the key themes in Charles Eckert’s and Thomas Harris’s accounts of respectively the use of stars in tie-ups between film studios and consumer industries and the publicity machines used by the studios to manufacture star images. Karen Alexander situates such industrial processes within the wider context of representation and ideology. Recording the exclusion of black actors from stardom and the severe restriction of their

roles in conformity to racist assumptions and arguments, she suggests how ‘the system’ has material effects in the sphere of subjectivity and identity.

Part II: Stars and society develops this issue, focusing on the cultural role of the star system. Richard Dyer adapts Weber’s concept of charisma to suggest that certain performers become stars rather than others because their images embody central but threatened values within a given social conjuncture. Charles Eckert and Charles Wolfe, using respectively neo-Marxist/Freudian structuralism and semiotics, develop sophisticated intertextual readings of star images as they circulate in society through filmic, political and journalistic discourses. All three writers use textual analysis to interpret the ideological work star images perform in a given society.

Charles Eckert concludes his dissection of the political content of the ‘Shirley Temple’ text with an ironic acknowledgement of the power of the fantasy she embodies. Charlotte Herzog and Jane Gaines challenge textual interpretation with questions of audience. Drawing on ethnographic approaches, they treat fantasy as practice rather than image, examining the extra-cinematic circulation of Joan Crawford within the discourses of fashion and related social practices of women who remake dresses worn by the stars. Read in relation to Eckert’s work, this research suggests a struggle in the arena of fantasy between the exploitative aims of the producer and the appropriations practised by specific groups of consumers.

Behroze Gandhi and Rosie Thomas, writing on three stars who span the history of Indian cinema, raise issues of national cultural context. While under British imperialism, Indian cinema adapts the Hollywood model, producing in different historical moments three distinctive and exemplary female stars. Negotiation is a key term in their analysis of the cultural productivity of these stars, recalling Richard Dyer’s work on the relations between star images and ideological contradiction.⁷ In the case of Fearless Nadia, Nargis Dutt and Smita Patil, a major contradiction emerges between modernity and tradition. In their images, changing values of motherhood, sexuality, and gender meet with the deeply mythological embedding of the female image in Indian culture. Gandhi and Thomas suggest the powerful resonances produced in the negotiations between such contradictory forces, endowing these stars with a political potency and national status that appear to exceed anything attained by comparable women stars in the West.

Stars and Society concludes by shifting from the functioning of stars within larger social structures and practices to the operation of the social within personal reception. Richard Dyer addresses the ideological construct at the heart of Western stardom—the individual person. The star promises what mass society and the human sciences—sociology, Marxism, psychoanalysis—throw into question: intimate access to the authentic self. In this respect, stars offer their audiences not only consumable images or ideological values but

personal relationships. This raises the issue of identification with which Jackie Stacey closes this section. In the written responses of self-confessed fans she finds a range of identificatory modes and practices in which, contrary to early cinepsychoanalytic formulations, difference from the star is equally important as recognised similarity.

In these sections stars are discussed mainly as industrial, ideological and cultural products. *Part III: Performers and signs* focuses on stars as the products of film aesthetics, considering issues of performance, text, genre and mode. Barry King's conception of stardom as the actor's professional adaptation to institutional and filmic conditions of production brings the interdependence of economics and aesthetic forms to bear on star performance. John O. Thompson, drawing on semiotic approaches to textual meaning, suggests how the contribution of particular star images to film texts can be analysed, while Andrew Britton teases out the interrelation between star images and generic conventions. Finally, my own piece considers stars as symbolic figures within the broader aesthetic tradition of melodrama, suggesting that stardom with its intense focus on the moral drama of personal identity offers evidence of the continuing activity of the melodramatic imagination in popular culture.

Each section closes on questions of identity and desire which are central to the effectivity of stars. *Part IV: Desire, meaning and politics* applies institutional, semiotic, cultural, and psychoanalytic approaches to questions of desire, audiences, readings, pleasures, meanings and politics. What emerges from these essays written from their different perspectives is a new conception of identity as multiple, ambivalent, contradictory, always in process of construction, but rarely dispensable. Work on feminine subjectivity suggests that the construction of the patriarchal, bourgeois subject is a hegemonic project rather than an achieved dominance, needing constant reassertion, contested by groups who cannot develop within it, and open to transformation.⁸ Stars as objects of desire, 'social hieroglyphs', and role models provide a vital link between personal identity and politics.

Michel Mourlet's opening pean to Charlton Heston defends the violence entailed in the spectacle of masculinity, identifying the energy of desire with male machismo, in an eloquent exemplification of masculine spectatorship, at once engaging and disturbing. Miriam Hansen looks at another male star, Rudolph Valentino, renowned as an erotic cult figure for a huge female audience. Reworking cinepsychoanalytic models, she explores the vexing question of female spectatorship, examining those constructions of narrative, camera and the look which anticipate a female audience. Feminine spectatorship is characterised by sexual ambivalence, oscillation, multivalent looking; the construction of the male image for this 'undomesticated female gaze' unsettles the fixity and mastery of masculinity, animating the feminine

and ethnic 'otherness' of the Valentino persona in an oscillation between passivity and activity, sadism and masochism, which offers the female audience a fantasy of 'erotic reciprocity'.

Andrea Weiss focuses on the relation of female audiences to female stars. Given the dearth of representation for lesbian viewers, she asks how oppressed, oppositional identities emerge, looking at the way dominant discourses and cultural practices can be re-read within subcultural lesbian discourses. In the thirties and forties, the Hollywood star system supported strong female stars, often in women's genres, who under pressure of censorship were denied explicit heterosexual expression. The resulting sexually ambiguous, androgynous figures filled a gap in the public imagery available for lesbian audiences, while the circulation of subsidiary texts detailing the off-screen lives of stars was paralleled by a lesbian network of 'gossip' and rumour; consequently lesbian audiences drew on different knowledges from heterosexual audiences. Looking at the films of Dietrich, Garbo and Hepburn, Andrea Weiss suggests the textual strategies which enable alternative sexual identities to be 'read-in' against those preferred in heterosexual discourse.

In that she has been popularly taken to represent the new, 'politicised' woman of the sixties and seventies—feminism's answer to 'what do women want?'—desire and politics meet overtly in Jane Fonda. The issue is whether and how the star as a product of a mass entertainment industry and a singular individual can be used for oppositional politics. Tessa Perkins takes up the question, what and who does 'Jane Fonda' represent? In examining the attempts of the press to contain by belittling the radical claims of her image, the ambivalent responses of many feminists, and the frequent contradiction between image and film roles, Tessa Perkins effectively recasts this question, shifting from the quest for conclusive meaning or political judgement to the proposition that ambivalence itself is part of Jane Fonda's significance. The intense negotiations which her image provokes clarify issues at stake in the public contest around women and politics. Thus stars offer not fixed meanings nor role models but a focus in the continuous production and struggle to define and redefine desires, meanings and identities.

David Lusted's essay on Tommy Cooper, Diana Dors and Eric Morecombe, stars of British variety and cinema who found an alternative existence as television personalities, develops the issue of subcultural contestation in relation to the institution of television, working-class audiences and, implicitly, British culture. While these stars are not overtly political, they represent their audiences through the subcultural readings they make possible. The emphasis here is less on image than on the institutional and generic practices of different television programme formats which they exploit or subvert. Against the individualism of the star system, David Lusted

stresses the *social* dimension of the meanings and pleasures offered to working-class audiences by these stars. Their work in other entertainment traditions calls up 'a rich repertoire of reference in popular cultural memory' and through their refusal of television's protocols and their manipulation of its codes, they both represent and collude with working-class experience.

Finally, the different strands of this anthology meet in Kobena Mercer's analysis of the convergence of different media industries, music, performance, the horror film, stardom, sex, race, masculinity and cinema in the transformations of Michael Jackson's face alluded to or performed in the pop-video, *Thriller*. The racial and sexual ambiguity of Jackson's androgynous, Peter Panish, Europeanised black looks, the eroticism of the Afro-American soul singer's voice, and *Thriller's* play with the conventions of the horror film all, in Kobena Mercer's analysis, combine to question prevailing stereotypes of black masculinity. Beyond this, Mercer implies, Jackson's success in popularising black music in white markets is linked to his revitalisation of stardom itself. *Thriller* in its parodic play with show bizz and film genre conventions celebrates both the desire and the horror involved in the metamorphosis which produces the 'star-as-image'. Kobena Mercer's account of Jackson's resonant intertextual image demonstrates that despite the retraction of the Hollywood studio system, stars continue to be produced across the media. More importantly, his analysis shows how a particular star contributes to the arena of cultural contestation when pleasure and politics intersect.

NOTES

- 1 See D.Kehr, 'A star is made', *Film Comment*, 1986, vol. 15, no. 1, which contrasts the careers of Henry Winkler and John Travolta; J.Langer, 'Television's "personality system"', *Media, Culture and Society*, 1981, vol. 3, no. 1, October, and J.Ellis, 'Stars as a cinematic phenomenon', in *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- 2 R.Dyer, *Stars*, London, British Film Institute, 1979.
- 3 See C.Johnston, 'Women's cinema as counter-cinema', in C.Johnson (ed.) *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973, and L.Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 1975, vol. 16, no. 3, Autumn.
- 4 See A.Friedberg, 'Identification and the star: A refusal of difference', in C. Gledhill (ed.) *Star Signs: Papers from a Weekend Workshop*, London, British Film Institute Education Department, 1982; P.Cook, 'Star Signs', *Screen*, 1979/80, vol. 20, nos. 3/4, Winter; and John Ellis, 'Stars as a cinematic phenomenon', in *Visible Fictions*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982.
- 5 M.Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, New York, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1974 and Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974.

- 6 See C.Gledhill, 'Introduction' and P.Cook, 'Stars and politics' in C.Gledhill (ed.) *Star Signs: Papers from a Weekend Workshop*, op. cit.
- 7 For discussion of the concept of negotiation see C.Gledhill, 'Pleasurable negotiations' in D.Pribram (ed.) *Female Spectators*, London, Verso, 1988.
- 8 See L.Williams, 'When the woman looks' in M.A.Doane, P.Mellencamp and L.Williams (eds) *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, Los Angeles, American Film Institute, 1984 and "'Something else besides a mother": *Stella Dallas* and the Maternal Melodrama' in C.Gledhill (ed.) *Home is Where the Heart Is*, London, British Film Institute, 1987; J.Walker, 'Psychoanalysis and feminist film theory: The problem of sexual difference and identity', *Wide Angle*, 1984, vol. 6, no. 3; D.Pribram, *Female Spectators*, op. cit.