

1 STAR STUDIES: MAPPING OUT THE FIELD OF STAR SCHOLARSHIP WITHIN FILM STUDIES

Introduction

Film stars attract attention. They also play a seminal role in the production and marketing of movies, often accounting for a large proportion of a film's budget. Stars are used to secure funding for films due to the belief that they make a significant contribution to the potential profitability of movies in an otherwise unpredictable market. Many films are produced as 'star vehicles', showcasing the star's talent, capitalising on both their acting skills and their public persona. Stars are so vital to the overall operation and success of the film industry that their popularity is closely and systematically monitored. 'Bankable' stars are highly sought after and excessively well remunerated. Many of the world's top stars have a large international fan-base, while most of the major film-making countries have produced stars of international standing. Some stars have even been used to represent national characteristics within the global economy of the mass media, their fame extending well beyond the confines of the cinema via newspaper and magazine journalism, the internet, and television and radio appearances. Tabloid newspapers and lifestyle magazines are heavily dominated by images, stories and speculation about film stars, as are television chat shows and internet websites.



Susan and God (1940), starring Joan Crawford (on right) with Rose Hobart (on left) in gowns by Adrian

Given the importance of stardom within the film industry and popular culture generally, it is not surprising that the academic study of stars has become one of the most important branches of film studies. This area of film scholarship has proliferated since the publication of Richard Dyer's *Stars* in 1979, this book precipitating a 'seismic shift in the way in which star studies were perceived' (Hollinger 2006: 35). Dyer's combination of semiotics and sociology produced the 'star text' and stimulated considerable interest in star images across films, publicity and promotional materials. Meanwhile, Dyer's *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1987) drew increasing attention to the interpretive activities of audiences, mainstream and marginal (e.g., the black and gay communities), with its illuminating case studies of Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson and Judy Garland. The first anthologies of star studies appeared in 1991 in Britain and the United States, Christine Gledhill's *Stardom* and Jeremy Butler's *Star Texts*, both containing extracts of Dyer's work as well as essays inspired by his approach. These collections promoted high-level scholarship on stars, demonstrating that star studies had become a legitimate area of academic enquiry.

This chapter provides an overview of the key works within star studies, highlighting the major trends within this branch of film studies, charting the way in which it became increasingly international, moving from theory to history and from the general (i.e., stardom as an industrial and cultural phenomenon) to the specific (i.e., case studies of particular stars). The focus here is less on stars and more on the academic literature about stars and stardom. While outlining the key themes and methodology of Richard Dyer's ground-breaking book, this chapter also considers the work of scholars that preceded and influenced *Stars*, as well as discussing the contribution of scholars that have subsequently advanced research on stardom.

Star studies

While the origins of star studies as a distinctive branch of film studies can be traced back to the late 1970s, the following decades represented a rich and volatile period of growth and development, one that finally settled into a period of consolidation at the end of the 90s. Prior to this consolidation, star studies was fragmented, its methods and terminology being contested, as numerous leading exponents sought to stake out their own territory.¹ Writing in 1998, Jeremy Butler stated that star studies was 'still in a rather embryonic state' (Butler 1998: 352). This was the year that a new edition of Dyer's *Stars* was published, while a section on stardom was included in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, 1998). Star studies really came of age, however, at the start of the twenty-first century. In 2000, a section on stars was included in *The Film Studies Reader* (edited by Joanne Hollows, Peter Hutchings and Mark Jancovich), while Paul McDonald's *The Star System*, Ginette Vincendeau's *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* and Ulrike Sieglöhr's edited collection *Heroines without Heroes* augmented an expanding body of literature on stars and stardom. The latter two publications, along with Bruce Babington's edited collection *British Stars and Stardom* (2001), were instrumental in broadening the international scope of star studies by raising the profile of European stars and identifying the distinguishing characteristics of stardom in specific national contexts. Indeed, Babington's book set its face squarely against the 'Hollywoodcentric film theorists' in an effort to undermine the orthodox accounts that had assumed that the characteristics of the Hollywood star system pertained equally in other national contexts (Babington 2001: 3).

In the twenty-first century the 'Hollywoodcentric' approach to star studies has slowly broken down, with some of the most original work being produced by European scholars on European stars, from Erica Carter's *Dietrich's Ghosts* (2004) to Tytti Soila's edited

collection *Stellar Encounters* (2009).² The latter, in particular, draws together a diverse selection of essays on European film stars, including those of Greece, Finland and Scandinavia, in a bid to redress the Anglo-American bias. In addition to challenging the notion of Hollywood as the originator of the star system, this book focuses largely on the relationship between stars and nationhood, the ways in which stars embody national characteristics and represent specific moments within a nation's history. Meanwhile, research on non-western stars has appeared in published collections,³ culminating in the first major publications in English devoted exclusively to non-western stars: most notably, Neepa Majumdar's *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s–1950s* (2009) and *Chinese Film Stars* (edited by Mary Farquhar and Yingjin Zhang, 2010). While the former extends the work of Richard Dyer with a detailed and authoritative examination of female stardom in Indian sound cinema prior to 1960, the latter provides an historical account of stars from various Chinese territories (including Taiwan and Hong Kong), from the silent era through to the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, with many of its contributors subjecting the images of Chinese stars to a Dyerian analysis.

In order to be selective and focused, a number of star studies have used case studies as the basis for exploring various aspects of stardom, such as Karen Hollinger's *The Actress* (2006), Jeanine Basinger's *The Star Machine* (2007) and Mia Mask's *Divas on Screen* (2009). The increasing amount of material available on stars by the end of the 1990s gave star scholars greater scope to focus their research on more detailed investigation into the work, image and appeal of a single star. This is certainly part of the rationale behind the *Star Decades: American Culture/American Cinema* series edited by Adrienne L. McLean and Murray Pomerance for Rutgers University Press.⁴ These books consist of between ten and twelve chapters written by different authors, each examining the work of a star or

combination of stars within a particular decade. The stars included here are taken to be representative of Hollywood cinema and American culture of the time, with each volume offering a wide-ranging look at various types of star for a specific era. Within a short space of time, this series of books has dramatically expanded the range of scholarship on Hollywood stars from the silent, classical, post-studio and contemporary periods.

Academic books devoted to the examination of the work, image and appeal of an individual star, however, still remain something of a rarity in film studies. Adrienne L. McLean's *Being Rita Hayworth: Labor, Identity, and Hollywood Stardom* (2005) is a notable exception, one that has been highly influential in various ways, paving the way for the gradual expansion of the single star study within academic publishing. This investigation into the discursive nature of the films, image, publicity, performances and business interests of the popular star of Hollywood musicals and crime melodramas of the 1940s and 50s, Rita Hayworth, expanded Richard Dyer's work on star images, publicity and promotion, making more extensive use of archival materials than previous studies of the star (i.e., using scrapbooks, press books, fan magazines and newspaper reviews from various archives and libraries). A significant part of the project was the re-evaluation of Hayworth's talents as a performer (i.e., as an actress, singer and dancer) through detailed scrutiny of her screen performances but also by investigating her working relationships with choreographers. This provided detailed examination of female stardom in classical Hollywood that challenged many of the established claims about Hayworth, establishing her professionalism and autonomy.

In 2007, Lisa Downing and Sue Harris stated that, 'very few single case studies existed in the field of academic publishing' (Downing and Harris 2007: 11).⁵ They suggested that one of the main reasons for this was the widespread publication of non-academic books on film stars, noting that many film academics were concerned to distinguish their work from industry-based, fan-based

and biographical material. Nevertheless, they insisted that studies devoted to the work of a single star provide a useful way of reading star images. A single star case study, they point out, enables one to examine the work of a star both in and beyond their own national cinema, in relation to a variety of directors, and across a body of work that appeals to a range of audiences. It also enables a scholar to detect and explore 'the developments, breaks and lines of continuity that constitute her image over the course of a career' (Downing and Harris 2007: 8). Thus, in their own book, they note that a 'careful look at [Catherine] Deneuve as star image, both on-screen and off-screen, over a period of forty years, reveals previously undiscussed instances of prescience, lines of continuity and ignored fractures in her trajectory' (ibid.). Since the publication of their book, other single star studies have been published (e.g., Amy Lawrence's *The Passion of Montgomery Clift*, 2010a), while many more are anticipated as part of the British Film Institute's *Film Star* series.

Star studies before *Stars*

Richard Dyer's *Stars* brought together numerous studies of film stardom, along with work on gender and film, synthesising and advancing existing claims, while introducing his own ideas.⁶ A number of the key studies upon which he drew had emerged in Europe (most notably, France) in the late 1950s and early 60s, including Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* and Edgar Morin's *Les Stars*, both published originally in French in 1957. Susan Werner has observed that Morin's study initially generated little interest from scholars in contrast to Roland Barthes's, although it received new attention and admiration in the 1990s (Werner 2007: 27). Morin borrowed freely from anthropology as well as Marxist theory in order to understand how film stars operated as myths within modern technological and urban societies, and his work on stars has been

seen as a response to massive and rapid cultural changes in postwar France, a situation in which French stars played a major social role in the popular negotiation of the various contradictions resulting from the clash and co-existence of modernity and tradition (Gaffney and Holmes 2007b: 8). The major theme resonating throughout *Les Stars* is the mythic nature of stardom. For Morin, stardom is a myth produced by the reality of twentieth-century human history but 'it is also because human reality nourishes itself on the imaginary to the point of being semi-imaginary itself', hence his claim that 'stars live on our substance and we on theirs' (Morin 2005: 148). 'Ectoplasmic secretions of our own being, they are immediately passed down the production lines of the great manufacturers who deploy them in galaxies stamped with the most distinguished trademarks' (ibid.).

Morin describes stars as *monstres sacrés* (sacred monsters), venerated public individuals above or beyond criticism by ordinary mortals. For him, the star is both real and imaginary, of life and dream, born from a conjunction of capitalism, modernity and the mythology of love, all three factors determining 'sacred monstrosity: the star' (ibid.: 135). Existing simultaneously in two worlds, the ordinary and extraordinary, 'the star straddles both sacred and profane, divine and real, aesthetic and magic' (ibid.: 84). To describe the combination of a star's extraordinary qualities and ordinariness, Morin employs the notion of the 'superpersonality', one that combines beauty and spirituality, one that 'must unceasingly prove itself by appearances: elegance, clothes, possessions, pets, travels, caprices, sublime loves, luxury, wealth, grandeur, refinement' (ibid.: 38). Morin also uses the term 'marvellous' to describe this state, arguing that 'the stars bluff, exaggerate, spontaneously divinize themselves' not just to attract publicity but also to be more like their ideal self, their double (ibid.: 55). The star's mythic identity is built from a mixture of belief and doubt, while their power for audiences lies in their search for coherent identity, adult personalities being formed out of playful mimesis (e.g., games and role-play). For the

public at large, stars offer 'patterns of culture' that 'give shape to the total human process that has produced them' (ibid.: 147). Whatever their precise role within the film industry, their importance, Morin insists, lies beyond that industry, in the wider culture in which stars are consumed and adopted as role models by all kinds of people: although chiefly, he claims, women and adolescents.

In many ways Morin's book sowed the seeds of some of the most important debates within star studies: the quasi-religious nature of star worship, the importance of publicity and merchandising, the prominence of the star's face and the importance of beauty and youth, the various levels of identification, the historical transformations in attitudes towards stars, and the distinctions between stars and characters, stars and lead actors, also between stars, pin-ups and starlets. While many of these points have subsequently been taken up by scholars (e.g., Jackie Stacey and Barry King), often little acknowledgment has been made regarding Morin's origination of these topics, in part perhaps due to the hyperbolic nature of his writings that, for some considerable time, may have appeared to invalidate the academic credibility of his research.

Charles Affron's writing on stars appears to have suffered a similar fate. When compared to academic writing on stars published after 1978, *Star Acting* (1977) seems allusive, hyperbolic and camp. This book contains many ideas that are worthy of academic consideration, particularly in terms of his interest in the dialectics of revelation and ambiguity, verisimilitude and abstraction, which provide a very useful starting point to a consideration of how stars act and how their performances are distinguished from those of other types of screen performer. Like Morin, he notes the celestial and religious vocabulary used to discuss film stars and also considers the role of fans in creating and sustaining stars.

The reverential and celestial vocabulary has been consecrated by decades of usage and press agency. The clichés' first connotations effectively separate

public from performer by an expanse of astral geography. The gods reign on high, the stars blink in the solar systems light-years away, and we mere mortals, worshipping at their shrines in blissful ignorance, celebrate the distance. (Affron 1977: 2)

Affron uses hyperbole here to convey the extraordinary emotions of being under a star's spell, while simultaneously mocking and caricaturing the extremes of this situation in recognition of the fact that much of this is stimulated by publicists on behalf of a huge and powerful industry. When he writes that we 'mortals are left clutching our wonder, and victims of that very wonder, overwhelmed by our enthusiasm and blinded by the light of the star's emanation', he evokes the various familiar, even hackneyed, tropes of melodrama (i.e., clutching, victims, overwhelmed, blinded), thereby creating some critical distance for himself as a scholar by using an obviously hyperbolic discourse (ibid.: 3). This is academic writing that is playful and daring but also, perhaps, rather fearful of attempting to make serious intellectual claims for film stars given that they could have been considered trivial within the context of academia in the late 1970s. Not surprisingly, therefore, Affron strays into camp, a discourse designed to take the trivial seriously, while rendering the serious trivial: for instance, when he writes that, films 'are breathtakingly perched between the unequivocal reality of the photographic process and a style that is by definition magnifying, hyperbolic, and utterly frivolous in its relationship to everyday modes of perception' (ibid.). It is camp that makes film's provisional occupation of a space between reality and style *breathtaking*, just as it is camp that makes film's relationship to everyday reality *utterly* frivolous.

The use of camp was both a radical and dangerous strategy in the 1970s, having the potential to invalidate scholarship, rob it of credibility, objectivity and authority. Imagine the reactions of scholars reading the following in 1977:

Coated with layers of makeup that obliterate blemish and dissymmetry, modelled by a miraculous array of lights, located and relocated by the giddy succession of frames, the stars capriciously play with life and subject it to a range of fictions from preposterous to profound. (Ibid.: 2)

How preposterous would scholars have found Affron's elegant description of the allure of such classic Hollywood stars as Garbo and Dietrich, with his 'giddy succession of frames' and his 'capriciously' playful stars, particularly those most concerned with enhancing film's reputation as a serious, intellectually demanding academic discipline within the humanities? It is perhaps only since film studies established itself as an academic subject more solidly in the 1980s that the merits of such writing can be appreciated. It is perhaps only in the wake of the influence of queer theory in media and cultural studies that Affron's work can be taken seriously. It would seem to be much easier now to appreciate and acknowledge the value of his detailed analyses (even his ecstatic appreciations) of the film performances of such Hollywood stars as Lillian Gish, Greta Garbo and Bette Davis, which fill the pages of *Star Acting*.

Francesco Alberoni's essay 'The Powerless Elite: Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of Stars' has never needed any apology or justification on the grounds of academic integrity.⁷ This was one of the first major sociological studies of stardom, written in a very different tone to the aforementioned works of Morin and Affron, and it had a profound influence on Richard Dyer's work on stars as well as on many other scholars of stardom and celebrity (e.g., P. David Marshall). Here Alberoni argued that stardom was a phenomenon directly linked to the development of large-scale industrial and urbanised societies, particularly in the early stages of nationhood, in order to fulfil various functions within the socio-political configuration of society: most notably, to distract public scrutiny away from the power elite (e.g., government ministers, aristocracy, monarchy, religious leaders and business

tycoons, etc.), as a focus for public debates about morality, as objects of identification and as symbols of social mobility. Within this configuration, stars represent an elite group in society that has no real power over the public but nevertheless enjoys unprecedented attention, wealth and freedom: in other words, exerting minimal social influence but generating maximum social interest.

Drawing upon Max Weber's work on charisma in his book *Economy and Society* (1968), Alberoni perceived of stars as those 'members of the community whom *all* can evaluate, love or criticize' (Alberoni 1972: 85, emphasis in original). As such, they are subjected to high levels of public scrutiny, operating as objects of gossip and scandal. In other words, they are continually evaluated. Evaluation takes a variety of forms but, most notably, in terms of the deviance or moral value of their character and behaviour in comparison to social norms. Alberoni notes that the conduct of stars is rarely judged in relation to general social norms but rather according to the perceived norms of the elite group or community. This necessarily entails the existence and maintenance of a gap between the society at large and the elite, divorcing their world (one of privilege) from that of the everyday, a world in which stars are placed by the will of the public. Their retention within the elite group requires careful management (just as the politician's does), so that the 'whole life of stars is thus astutely orchestrated and arranged', stars remaining under public scrutiny, being constantly evaluated and re-evaluated in order to ensure their place within the (powerless) elite, as representatives of a wider community (ibid.: 96). As part of this process, stars 'become an object of identification or a projection of the needs of the mass of the population' (ibid.: 92). Consequently, in his relatively short essay, Alberoni lay down many of the foundations of star theory, upon which Dyer and others would construct more detailed and elaborate theories of stardom and histories of the star system: namely, the nature of star power (and autonomy), media scrutiny of stars (i.e., the role of publicity), the exposure and control of scandal and gossip,

stars as symbols of morality (involving ideological contradictions being negotiated and resolved), the role of the audience in an individual's attainment and retention of star status, the relations between stars and fans (including the role of identification), and the significance of charisma. Each of these would resonate throughout Dyer's *Stars* and, subsequently, throughout star studies as it developed during the 1980s.

Dyer's Stars

While Richard Dyer's *Stars* was in part a survey of what had been done in the study of stars by 1978, it also broke new ground in providing a methodology for studying stars through a combination of semiotics and sociology, and by introducing three key concepts: (i) stars as 'images', (ii) star images having 'structured polysemy' that enable multiple interpretations (i.e., offering numerous meanings and pleasures) and (iii) stars as embodiments of ideological contradiction, through which social conflicts and crises are negotiated and resolved at a symbolic level. In terms of methodology, the book advocated the analysis of extra-filmic materials (e.g., press articles, previews, promotional materials and publicity) as a key part of film scholarship in addition to textual analysis of film sequences. The main task here was not to determine the correct meaning of stars but rather to expose the variety of meanings that a star has for different types of audience, different in terms of race, class, gender, etc. Understanding textual analysis to be grounded in ideology, Dyer first set out the social, institutional and economic conditions of stardom, while noting that the importance of stars goes beyond their industrial function. Dyer insisted that, since stars have wider cultural significance, film scholars need to explore the relationships between stars and audiences, including various aspects of identification (Dyer 1979: 17).

At the heart of this book is the way that stars represent models of human subjectivity and social types (i.e., operating as stereotypes), combining both ordinary (or typical) and extraordinary qualities. Dyer identifies this as one of the major contradictions of stardom, the paradox of stars being special but also like people in real life. The other major paradox lies in the way that stars are taken to be representative of social groups (racial, ethnic, national, regional, sexual, etc.), while being regarded as unique individuals (different from everyone else, more talented or beautiful, etc.). Consequently, the 'star both fulfils/incarnates the type and, by virtue of her/his idiosyncrasies, individuates it' (ibid.: 47). Much of Dyer's work involves exploring the nature, functions and ambiguities (i.e., the instabilities) of star images. The notion of the 'star image' is central to his study. He writes, for instance, that, a 'star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and criticisms and commentaries' (ibid.: 60). He also makes a clear distinction between publicity and promotion, noting the way in which publicity goes beyond studio-produced material to include press and broadcast interviews, gossip columns and magazine articles, their value being that they appear to grant audiences privileged access to information about stars and, consequently, lending these some degree of authenticity that promotional materials (e.g., posters, trailers and advertisements) otherwise lack (ibid.: 61). In so doing, Dyer promoted the analysis of publicity and promotional material as one of the principal means of understanding a star's image. This revealed that textual analysis of film sequences alone was insufficient to fully comprehend the meanings and values of stardom. After *Stars*, the analysis of critical commentaries and reviews became a significant feature of film studies, with many scholars exploring the newspaper and magazine holdings of libraries and archives around the world, making increasing use of these for understanding what films have meant for audiences, often different kinds of audience in different locations and historical periods (Staiger 1992).

During the 1970s, detailed and highly elaborated scrutiny of film sequences (often in combination with highly elaborated and sophisticated theorising) had become a distinguishing feature of the discipline. Dyer's advocacy of a more systematic examination of publicity and promotional matter in addition to film analysis represented one of several challenges to orthodox film studies at the time. Another challenge that Dyer posed was in regard to authorship (or auteur theory) by undermining the authority of the director as the main controlling force of a film, suggesting that (certainly in the case of star vehicles) actors were often the main determinants of narrative, iconography and style (Dyer 1979: 62). He also challenged some long-held assumptions regarding stars and actors as inert matter to be controlled by directors and editors. In a section on montage and *mise en scène*, for instance, he noted that, 'an important tradition in film theory has tended to deny that performance has any expressive value: what you read into the performer, you read in by virtue of signs other than performance signs' (ibid.).

Dyer's chief concern, however, is not how actors act but how audiences interpret an actor's performance, suggesting that elaborated notation systems for performance (e.g., Laban) may be useful for describing movements and gestures but have little value in terms of interpretation of a particular performance (i.e., for what it means for audiences) arguing that, 'any attempt to analyse performance runs up against the extreme complexity and ambiguity of performance signs' (ibid.: 133). Nevertheless, Dyer outlines these performance signs (including facial expression, voice, gesture, posture, movement, etc.) with some precision (ibid.: 134–6). Of particular significance for Dyer was the fundamental ambiguity performance plays in the relationship between star and audience, arguing that this 'ambiguity needs to be understood in terms of the relation between the performer and the audience in the film', noting that interpretation requires a general knowledge of such things as 'intonation, gesture, eye dilations', which invariably is culturally and

historically specific (ibid.: 134). Furthermore, the specific vocabularies of movement and gesture are also determined by generic conventions as well as the context in which they appear in individual films, being part of a larger system of meaning operating throughout the film's *mise en scène* (ibid.: 136). They are also part of long and established acting traditions, Hollywood acting being influenced by a conflicting set of performance methods drawn from vaudeville and music hall, stage melodrama, radio, repertory theatre and Broadway, in addition to the 'Method' (ibid.: 140). As part of his discussion of acting, Dyer noted that what often distinguishes stars from other actors is their idiosyncratic style of performance. He writes that, 'a star will have a particular performance style that through its familiarity will inform the performance s/he gives in any particular film' (ibid.: 142). Consequently, he insists that a major part of 'the business of studying stars is to establish what these recurrent features of performance are and what they signify in terms of the star's image' (ibid.: 143).

Star studies after *Stars*

Richard Dyer's contribution to star studies cannot be over-estimated. His works have inspired successive generations of film, media and cultural studies scholars. In 2010, in the introduction to *Chinese Film Stars*, the editors note that 'many of the contributors to this volume refer to Dyer's scholarship', the book's title having been chosen as a tribute to his 'seminal work in the field' (Farquhar and Zhang 2010: 3). However, while 'Dyerian' studies of stars have proliferated between 1979 and the time of writing, two alternative approaches have also emerged: the first involving a more in-depth investigation into the part played by audiences in terms of how they engage with stars and the second in terms of a more detailed examination of stardom as an industrial process. Both approaches are represented in

one of the first star studies anthologies, Christine Gledhill's *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (1991a), which both synthesised and put into a dynamic relationship different academic approaches to stardom. In so doing, this eclectic collection sought to promote the diversity of film scholarship on stars in an inclusive and open-minded framework.

Stardom was published after an impasse in film scholarship created largely by a rift between two major factions – what Gledhill refers to as the proponents of ‘cine-psychoanalysis’, on the one hand, and more cultural studies-based scholars, on the other. These factions had emerged partly as a response to Laura Mulvey’s highly influential essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975), which had set out to reveal the extent to which patriarchal ideologies of sexual difference pervaded mainstream narrative cinema at the level of film style as well as content. In a compelling argument, she exposed the extent to which male characters typically assume more dominant narrative roles than females in Hollywood films, with male stars ordinarily positioned as subjects of a controlling gaze that simultaneously objectified their female co-stars. While female stars tend to be fragmented, frozen and fetishised as images, male stars are more often granted subjectivity and point of view, inviting the spectator’s identification.

Utilising psychoanalytic concepts, Mulvey elaborated her thesis by distinguishing between two kinds of ‘scopophilia’ (visual pleasure): *fetishism*, involving the female body being transformed into a fetish, producing pleasure by denying the unconscious threat (i.e., castration) posed by her body with a display of excessive spectacle and costume; and *voyeurism*, providing a more sadistic form of pleasure by punishing the woman at the level of the narrative. In this account of the visual pleasures of mainstream narrative cinema, female spectators were forced to occupy masculine positions by identifying with male protagonists and sharing the male gaze (thereby denying a female gaze), while male stars were deemed

unable (or, at least, unlikely) to bear objectification by an erotic look. Hollywood, with its system of continuity editing (i.e., shot/reverse-shot, eye-line matches, etc.), was condemned as intrinsically sexist, with avant-garde (or non-narrative) cinema representing the only viable alternative. The very pleasures of Hollywood cinema that had drawn so many people to film studies as an alternative to studying literature or fine art were now rendered abject, provoking many counter-arguments designed to salvage mainstream movies and the pleasures of popular cinemagoing. Not surprisingly, a wealth of such counter-arguments emerged in film journals and books over the next decades, along with a series of counter-counter-arguments, both from within feminist film theory and elsewhere, culminating in the critical impasse noted by Christine Gledhill in her introduction to *Stardom*.

Partly in response to the impasse in film theory, from the mid-1980s film scholarship veered increasingly towards history, culminating in the early 90s with the publication of Janet Staiger’s *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema* (1992) and Jackie Stacey’s *Star Gazing* (1994), which set out different ways for film scholars to investigate the historical and culturally rooted meanings of films, providing alternative methodologies for investigating film spectatorship than earlier theoretical (particularly, psychoanalytic) approaches. The call for a return to a more historical engagement with cinema led to the emergence of what became known as the ‘New Film History’, constituted in part by studies that qualified and challenged theoretical supposition with arguments supported by historical evidence, documentation and testimony. As the editors of *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches* have noted, what also distinguished this branch of film history was ‘an understanding that films are cultural artefacts with their own formal properties and aesthetics, including visual style and aural qualities’ (Chapman, Glancy and Harper 2007: 6). James Chapman, Mark Glancy and

Sue Harper have observed that contemporary film historians are required to understand the complex processes of filmic systems and the way that meaning is generated via editing, the various aspects of *mise en scène* (including performance), narrative and narration, sound and cinematography. In their introduction, they note that the conception of 'authorship' (one of four sections of the book) has been extended to account for the influential contributions of numerous personnel, including writers, art directors and stars as well as directors (*ibid.*). In fact, one of the defining features of this field, they claim, is the recognition of the role of stars as one of the main determinants of mainstream commercial narrative film, recognising also that star vehicles have been one of Hollywood's principal means of organising production.

During the late 1980s and early 90s, film studies was criss-crossed by numerous dividing lines. While film theorists took up either psychoanalytic or non-psychoanalytic positions, film historians were divided (among other things) between adopting the methods of reception studies or ethnography. Star studies was just one of many areas in which such divisions emerged and in which these positions were both negotiated and contested. Christine Gledhill's *Stardom* was published not only during this period but as a response to this situation, the editor drawing together theoretical and historical works that were variously informed by sociological, semiological and psychoanalytic approaches. Several of the essays had originally appeared in the journal *Wide Angle*, which was at the forefront of disseminating historical studies that both incorporated theory and revised existing historical accounts of various aspects of the film industry and film culture. Consequently, many of the essays included in *Stardom* question previous historical research in order to revisit and rethink some key areas of film history closely related to stardom.

The collection begins with historical accounts of the origins of the star system in American cinema, correcting some of the popular misconceptions that had arisen in orthodox film histories. Janet

Staiger's essay 'Seeing Stars' (previously published in the journal *The Velvet Light Trap* in 1983) refuted the established notion that the star system in American cinema was originated by Carl Laemmle, the head of the Independent Motion Picture Company (IMP), in 1910 when he poached actress Florence Lawrence (previously known as the 'Biograph Girl') from the Biograph Company. The story, which involves the announcement of the actress's tragic death in the press being refuted the following day and the declaration that she would soon be appearing in a series of IMP films, had been repeated in several major histories of Hollywood, with Florence Lawrence being identified the first film star (see Cook 1990: 41–2). Staiger, however, reveals that the Edison Company had begun promoting its stock company of players as early as 1909, borrowing various strategies of promotion from the American stage. She also claims that, in 1911, the Edison Company became one of the first American studios to credit its cast within its films and to provide exhibitors with slides advertising their players to be projected in between reels. This history was taken up by Richard deCordova in his essay 'The Emergence of the Star System in America' in the journal *Wide Angle* in 1985, which he developed into his book *Picture Personalities* in 1990. In an abridged version of this essay in *Stardom*, deCordova outlines key developments in the forms of information and knowledge circulating in the USA about film actors from 1907 to 1914, arguing that this was a critical period of transformation in which the star system came into fruition. DeCordova notes how the production and distribution of discourses about film performers involved three distinct types of knowledge, starting with discourses on acting from 1907, to the establishment of 'picture personalities' (actors known for their screen roles), culminating in the formation of star discourses (actors known for their personal lives as well as their screen roles) in 1914 (deCordova 1991: 17–24).

While discussion of acting features widely throughout *Stardom*, the book also makes it clear that there is far more to the work of stars

than the performances they give before the movie cameras. Promotional work, publicity and product endorsements and fashion modelling are all significant functions fulfilled by Hollywood's big names. This is clearly demonstrated in two influential essays included here: Charles Eckert's 'The Carole Lombard in Macy's Window' and Herzog and Gaines's "'Puffed Sleeves Before Tea-Time": Joan Crawford, Adrian and Women Audiences'. The combination of these two essays, moreover, is indicative of the book's revisionist approach to film history, with many of the claims made in the former (originally published in 1978) being challenged in the latter (originally published in 1985 with an 'afterword' added in 1991).

Charles Eckert's essay explored Hollywood's relationship with radio networks and with America's consumer culture of the 1930s, involving tie-ups with fashion and cosmetics manufacturers, as well as producers of drinks, electrical goods and automobiles. Eckert notes that during the mid- to late 1930s all of the major Hollywood studios adopted such practices to secure additional income streams, resulting in a large proportion of films aimed at women (as the principal consumers). While demonstrating the efficiency and entrepreneurialism of the Hollywood studios, Eckert also suggested that American women were more or less duped into buying consumer goods. It is this assumption that is interrogated and challenged by Charlotte Herzog and Jane Gaines in their essay. Assessing the impact of fashion promotion through films and film magazines, they found that claims that half a million copies of a fashionable dress worn by Joan Crawford in the film *Letty Lynton* (Clarence Brown, 1932) were sold were a myth, noting that 'Hollywood designers and fashion historians ... have continually cited the "Letty Lynton" dress as the most dramatic evidence of motion picture "influence" on fashion behaviour' (Herzog and Gaines 1991: 74).

In keeping with other developments within feminist film scholarship, Herzog and Gaines reconsider 'influence' in terms of

cultural production and women's subcultural response. Posing a series of questions about how female fans responded to 1930s female film stars, they ask whether star imitation was truly an indication that young women believed the message promoted by many Hollywood films that clothes could change their circumstances (*ibid.*). After a detailed consideration of the work of designer Gilbert Adrian (known simply as Adrian) for MGM, particularly his designs for Joan Crawford, the authors focus their attention on the fashion publicity produced to accompany such films as *Letty Lynton*, examining the way they address women. They conclude that while there is no evidence to prove that tens of millions of American women were seduced into buying ready-to-wear versions of Hollywood fashions during the 1930s, fashion 'worked to elicit women's participation in star and screen myth-making' and, while some women 'bought star products and tested star beauty recipes', many improvised with their own home-produced versions (*ibid.*: 87). This links directly to Jackie Stacey's project on British women's memories of Hollywood female stars of the 1940s and 50s, set out originally in her essay 'Feminine Fascinations: Forms of Identification in Star-Audience Relations' (1991) in *Stardom* and developed further in her book *Star Gazing* (1994). To both build on and depart from the work of Laura Mulvey on spectatorship and Richard Dyer on stars, Stacey examined the roles played by fashion and beauty products (i.e., those endorsed by stars) in the formation of the relationships between female fans and Hollywood stars, with the audience as the primary focus, their written testimony being analysed as much as the images of the stars.

Following the example of Richard Dyer, who had placed advertisements in the gay press requesting information about gay men's attachment to Judy Garland for his book *Heavenly Bodies*, Stacey advertised in two leading British women's weekly magazines, *Woman's Realm* and *Woman's Weekly*, to find readers willing to write about their favourite stars of the 1940s and 50s. This resulted in 350 letters and a further 238 completed questionnaires, enabling her

to examine the letters and questionnaires of white British women over the age of sixty, accepting that these are 'retrospective reconstructions of a past in the light of the present' and, as such, needing to be treated as narrative 'texts' rather than accurate and authentic accounts (Stacey 1994: 63). These revealed very different forms of cinematic identification from those associated with psychoanalytic feminist film theory, enabling Stacey to identify and distinguish between identificatory *fantasies* (e.g., worshipping) and *practices* (e.g., copying). Discussing extra-cinematic identificatory practices (i.e., pretending, resembling, imitating and copying), she identifies copying as the most common form, describing how female fans attempted to close the gap between themselves and the stars by transforming their appearance in order to look more like their favourite star (Stacey 1991: 155). She notes how her respondents' accounts revealed that stars were identified and remembered in relation to particular commodities: clothes, brands of soap and cosmetics.

Unlike earlier studies of Hollywood consumption and merchandising that had concentrated on production (most notably, Eckert's), Stacey's approach concentrated on consumption as consumer practice, on how and why women bought and used 'tie-in' products. Where previous accounts presented women as passive consumers of merchandise, they emerged in Stacey's work as more empowered and discerning. In this way, Stacey extended and revised the debate on consumerism and commodification, while simultaneously advancing the debate on identification and desire in audience-star relations, situating star studies at the crossroads of two important areas of film scholarship, consumerism and spectatorship. She also examined stardom within a specific national and historical context (wartime and postwar Britain), her study making an important contribution to studies of British Cinema, while establishing the importance of star studies for investigations into national cinema cultures. Stacey's work on stardom was one of the

first major attempts to use ethnographic methods as the basis of a star study and also one of the first to confine itself to a narrowly defined cultural, historical and theoretical framework. Out of this emerged some valuable work on memory and nostalgia, escapism, identification and desire, consumption and consumerism, knowledge and taste, as well the nature of fandom.⁸

While Stacey was instrumental in shifting the emphasis from star texts to the practices of audiences in stardom, others have steered star studies towards a more detailed understanding of the role of stars as workers within industrialised systems of film production, distribution and exhibition: most notably, Barry King, Danae Clark, Jane Gaines and Paul McDonald. Since the mid-1980s, Barry King has played a major role in terms of reconceptualising and providing a vocabulary for describing what stars do as actors and as workers within the changing economies of mainstream cinema. After receiving his PhD in 1984 from the University of London for his thesis on 'The Hollywood Star System: The Impact of an Occupational Ideology on Popular Hero-worship', King published his research in two articles: 'Articulating Stardom' in *Screen* in 1985 (later abridged and reprinted in *Stardom* in 1991) and 'Stardom as an Occupation' in Paul Kerr's *The Hollywood Film Industry* in 1986. Here, King made a distinction between two kinds of film acting, *impersonation* and *personification*, which result directly from three distinct economies: 'the cultural economy of the human body as a sign; the economy of signification in film; and the economy of the labour market for actors' (King 1991: 167). For King, the economics of acting lie principally with exclusivity: namely, actors with more exclusive attributes and skills (that their colleagues cannot replicate) are able to command higher salaries. The economies of film, moreover, are very different to those of the stage, where highly trained and gifted actors acquire the means – which King designates 'impersonation' – to subsume their own identities when performing characters, displaying versatility in the way they can convincingly

perform a wide range of character types. He notes that the tendency in cinema is to abandon impersonation in favour of 'personification' so that the actor's public identity is not subsumed within their character but rather remains on display, with the character overshadowed by their star persona.

Later, in his essay 'Embodying the Elastic Self: The Parametrics of Contemporary Stardom' (2003), King replaced the terms 'impersonation' and 'personification' with those of 'metaphorical' and 'metonymic' servitude, stating that, metaphorical servitude 'is the domain of the leading character actor who subordinates person as far as possible (technically and genetically) to the purposes of narrative, becoming a narrative function', while metonymic servitude involves greater similarity between the star's persona and the characters they play in their films (King 2003: 48). King notes that the metonymic servitude of stars results in them being narrative 'guests' within their films, their meaning (agency or character) lying outside the diegetic world of the film so that they can be read by audiences in terms of star persona rather than narrative character. He argues that while the stars of the studio era 'undertook metonymic servitude', appearing to be coherent and stable in their personae, contemporary stars 'are discursively challenged in their efforts to meld all the practices undertaken in their name into a coherent commercial identity' (ibid.: 49). Star's identities are now manufactured and maintained by a series of specialists who undertake responsibility for various and distinct aspects of their public profile. As a result, stars tend to work with what King calls a 'wardrobe of identities' (ibid.).

Another critical shift in King's conception of stars (and a shift from studio-era stars to post-studio-era stars) occurs due to the fact that stars are now no longer employees of the studios but rather 'stakeholders in the enterprise that manages their career' (ibid.). He notes that the star as entrepreneur must be ready 'to switch roles as business opportunities arise', particularly in a global market that has

given rise to the constant rewriting of star personae as former identities are maintained in some roles and films (especially high-profile, very lucrative and long-running film franchises, serials or series) alongside newly invented ones (ibid.). King names this phase of stardom 'autographic' (i.e., self-writing). Thus, stars are no longer there to be read by audiences differently (i.e., as polysemic, as Dyer and others have described), but rather they produce themselves differently in order to be read in different ways, therefore playing a much more fundamental role in the process of interpretation than studio-era stars. Again this is linked to the basic economic fact that stars are no longer simply workers but entrepreneurs (that is, worker-managers). Operating in a fragmented, highly competitive, intensely scrutinised, highly commodified global market, the new generation of successful entrepreneurial stars are forced to manage their personae by 'stretching an apparent core of personal qualities to cover all contingencies' (ibid.: 60). King notes that, as a result, 'persona is elastic rather than plastic, closer to a procedure for surviving, a heuristic self, than an essence' (ibid.).

King's work breaks with Richard Dyer's notion of star texts, using Marxist economic theory combined with historical research, augmenting a branch of star studies that includes the work of Danae Clark and Paul McDonald. Of these three scholars, McDonald has retained the strongest connections to Dyer's work, particularly with his supplementary essay to the new edition of *Stars* published in 1998. In 'Reconceptualising Stardom', McDonald noted four main areas in which star studies had developed since 1979: namely, (i) stars and history; (ii) star bodies and performance; (iii) stars and audiences; and (iv) stardom as labour. Of these four areas, it is the latter that comes closest to McDonald's own interests and approach to stardom, enabling him to build on the work of Barry King, Danae Clark, Jane Gaines, Robert S. Sennett and Richard deCordova, among others. In so doing, McDonald has moved away from the interpretation of star images per se towards an investigation into the

institutional practices of stardom in terms of production, distribution and exhibition, of ownership and regulation, exploring what stars do and how they are used, not just by audiences but also by studios, agents, managers and publicists. 'To appreciate the social activity of stardom,' he writes, 'a pragmatics of star practices is needed to accompany a semiotics of star meanings' (McDonald 1998: 200).

McDonald, in his book *The Star System*, provides a coherent overview of developments in Hollywood stardom as an industry throughout the twentieth century. He argues here that understanding how stars operate in the context of production 'requires not only looking at the image ... but also the image as a source of economic value' (McDonald 2000: 118). This involves consideration of various factors: (i) the connections between the star systems of the American theatre (including vaudeville) and film; (ii) how in the studio era new stars were systematically developed or manufactured; (iii) how the break-up of the studio system from the 1950s impacted on the operations and effectiveness of the star system; (iv) how stars operate in the freelance labour market of post-studio Hollywood; (v) the role of agents; (vi) the nature of contractual arrangements between stars and production companies or studios; (vii) the function of stars not just as elite actors but also as producers and executive producers; (viii) the nature and function of licensing agreements concerning star images and merchandising; and, finally, (ix) the role of the internet in reshaping the nature and control of star images, as well as the relationships between stars and their audience (ibid.: 119).

Observing that all the factors that were necessary for the development of the star system in America were in place by 1913, McDonald notes that during the 1930s and 40s the star system operated in virtually the same way at all five of the major studios: Paramount, Warner Bros., the Fox Film Corporation (20th Century-Fox after 1935), Radio Keith-Orpheum (RKO) and Metro Goldwyn Mayer (MGM), until a US Supreme Court ruling in 1948 forced these companies to divorce their theatre circuits from their

production and distribution operations. While covering the whole of this period, McDonald's book concentrates largely on the breakdown of the studio system, describing how the studios and the major stars adjusted when the American film industry adopted the 'package-unit' mode of production: the package ordinarily including a producer, a director, a writer and a star or group of stars, usually brought together by an agent.

McDonald has also explored the role of agents in his essay, 'The Star System: The Production of Hollywood Stardom in the Post-Studio Era' (2008). Here he examines the role talent agencies play in contemporary Hollywood alongside personal managers, publicists and legal representatives, noting that despite the shift of power from the studios to these mediating companies in the 1990s some things have remained unchanged: for instance, that a 'small cluster of companies ... make, manage, and control the capital of stardom in Hollywood cinema' (McDonald 2008: 180). This begs the question of who does the choosing, selecting those relatively few leading film performers that become candidates for stardom. It also raises the issue of who gets chosen and why, questions that will continually resurface throughout the following chapters of this book.

Conclusion

Since the 1970s, star studies has become an important branch of film studies precisely because of its capacity to reinvent itself and embrace new areas of investigation and methodology. Over the years, scholars have utilised a wide range of methods to investigate numerous areas of stardom, national star systems and the work (i.e., films and images) of stars from different countries and different historical periods. In so doing, scholars have combined various methodologies in order to produce meaningful and comprehensive studies, involving analysis of films and extra-filmic materials (e.g., publicity and

promotion), fan discourse and audience surveys, interviewing film industry personnel from a wide range of fields of activity (e.g., production, marketing, merchandising and publicity), as well as filmgoers. Much more work remains to be done in terms of liaising with industry specialists, particularly in terms of agencies, management companies and legal firms, from many parts of the world, including Bollywood and China, in order to fill the gaps that still remain. This suggests that the future of star studies promises to be as rich as its history.

2 METHODS: WAYS OF ANALYSING SCREEN PERFORMANCE

Introduction

Many film actors become stars following a 'breakthrough' role in which their performance attracts the attention of film critics, receives rave reviews and is subsequently nominated for a major film award. On the back of this, they often gain a higher public profile, attain star status (with leading roles, top billing and star vehicles) and sometimes acquire a recognisable and distinctive (often imitable) signature style: that is, an idiosyncratic set of gestures, movements, poses and expressions that become a major part of their trademark. Even though this is not the only route to film stardom, it is the classic one. Consequently, many stars, agents and managers take acting seriously. Stars go to considerable lengths to extend and improve their acting skills, while their publicists ensure that attention is drawn to their achievements. Critics and journalists pay close attention to star performances, charting their highs and lows, comparing one performance with another, either from an earlier film or by another actor in the same film. Film performances are scrutinised, interpreted and evaluated, repeatedly and in detail, by different kinds of people from all over the world: audiences, fans, buffs, newspapers critics, industry analysts and trade journalists, magazine feature writers, interviewers, gossip columnists, internet bloggers, celebrity reporters, film scholars and media students.