

Celebrity and Power

Fame in Contemporary Culture

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4

The Cinematic Apparatus and the Construction of the Film Celebrity

The emergence of the cinema star, according to Richard D. Cordova, is intimately linked with the decline of the allure of the apparatus of motion picture projection. Until about 1907, the focus of attention was on the technical feat of displaying images and stories on the screen.¹ Most of early cinema was documentary in nature, with aspects of everyday life, circus performances, and sporting events depicted on-screen.² This changed somewhat because of the constant need for new and interesting (at least previously unseen) film product. The early connection of film to the craft of illusionism and magic can be seen in the films of Georges Méliès, an illusionist turned filmmaker, and in the position of the exhibition of films as a type of novelty act in vaudeville theaters.³ In both cases, the enigmatic quality of the production was related not so much to the plot as to how the images were created and juxtaposed. Early films (pre-1907), according to DeCordova, could be characterized by their close connection to "action" and movement. The construction of the film celebrity emerged only after an initial decade of exhibition. It is part of traditional — although now challenged — film history that the large production houses, such as Biograph, impeded the development of the star by not releasing the real names of the actors involved in any film. The impetus behind the development of stardom then was the audience's construction of intertextual continuities. According to Walker, the audience began identifying screen personalities not by their names but by nicknames that attempted to capture the face, body type, or hairstyle of the performer. Designations such as "the fat guy" and "the girl with the curls" became a way for nickelodeon exhibitors to advertise their short features through a recognizable audience interest.⁴ Hampton's *History of the American Film Industry from Its Beginnings to 1931* serves as a guide for this reading of early film and its relationship to the construction of personalities.⁵ More recent scholarship has disputed the

simplicity of this early account in exploring the development of the film star system. Some researchers, such as Staiger, have been able to identify forms of identification that predate previous designations of its development in the early to mid-1910s.⁶ The interconnections of filmmaking to other entertainment industries, such as theater and vaudeville, which had well-developed star systems, further complicate the reasons and rationales behind the organization of a film star system. What can be safely concluded is that the reluctance to release the names of performers gradually gave way to an industry that used its performers as one of the primary forms of promotion and marketing of its product.

A more accurate way of describing the emergence of the film star is to see that the film industry was in the process of determining its categorical position in the entertainment industry. In its affiliation with vaudeville, the film industry was part of an already established and successful cultural industry that possessed its own system of fame, prestige, and celebrity.⁷ *Variety*, the trade newspaper for most of the vaudevillian performing arts in the early part of the twentieth century, regularly displayed large photos of vaudeville stars on the first page; the featuring of these acts became one of the central means by which the publication attached itself to the glamour of the industry. Moreover, as Allen points out, vaudeville had successfully produced what he calls a mass audience, which included not only the working class but large segments of the middle class.⁸ So the film industry had expanded its audience beyond the limited circulation of penny arcades and variations of peep shows to a national audience that encompassed both the working class and the middle class.

Film was also positioned in relationship to traditional theater, which attracted a much wealthier clientele than most vaudeville houses. The way in which the film magazine of the period, *Moving Picture World*, differentiated between the true "acting" of the theater and the idea of performance in movies illustrates that a clear hierarchy of the arts was at work. Prior to 1907, *Moving Picture World* described movie actors usually as "picture performers." *To perform* was understood to connote a display of natural action. *To act* had the connotation of creating the nuances of character, the artifice of becoming the person one was playing. In the development of techniques like the close-up, in the gradual appearance of narrative structure, and in the movement to "feature" length, one can see the attempts to build into the

cinematic structure elements that would be emulative of aesthetic value perceived in theatergoing. The increasing focus on individual performers and codes of character, as opposed to the dominant code of action of early-twentieth-century film, moved the film industry into an investment in a star system that at the very least emulated the theater star system. Indeed, Adolph Zukor attempted to inject the aura of the theatrical star into film by contracting with famous stage actors to appear in films. The most famous of these, Sarah Bernhardt, played the lead in the critically successful though less financially successful *Queen Elizabeth* (1912). However, the strategy contained a slightly flawed conception of the movie audience, because the most famous contract players to emerge out of Zukor's Famous Players Company were in fact known only as film stars.⁹ The development of the star system thus is most indicative of a cultural industry attempting to capture a certain legitimacy and cultural space. Stars and dramas that emphasized the psychological development of characters articulate an attempt to establish the cinema's affinity with the theater. The actual meanings of the film star of the 1910s or 1920s never achieved this aesthetic connotation because the audience's investment in the star, an audience comprising primarily working-class and middle-class individuals, expressed a distinctively filmic aura for the screen celebrity.

Edgar Morin's discussion of this aura of the film celebrity of the 1920s emphasizes the godlike quality perceived in these select few. One of the first instances of name recognition came with Nick Carter, who was still known only by his screen name. Only after playing a number of different heroic roles did the star become recognizable as a hero himself.¹⁰ By 1919, the star crystallized as an entity distinct from his or her screen personas. As an entity, the star and the industry that by this time surrounded him or her began to protect the image the star conveyed to the public. For example, Rudolph Valentino maintained the image of the romantic and heroic lover throughout his career by actively choosing his film roles to support that construction. Morin notes that Greta Garbo epitomized the separate and aloof quality of the film stars of the 1920s; she "remained mysteriously distant from the mortals" (her audience) both in her screen presence and in her lifestyle in her grand Hollywood mansion.¹¹

However, the film star aura was never so simply maintained. It was built on a dialectic of knowledge and mystery. The incomplete nature of the audience's knowledge of any screen actor became the founda-

tion on which the film celebrity was constructed into an economic force. The staging ground from which film actors entered the world of celebrity was publicity. Publicity constitutes the extratextual movement of the screen actor into other forms of popular discourse. The staging of publicity on behalf of individual celebrities became the province of agents and specifically publicity agents. The most famous of these publicity innovators, Carl Laemmle—owner of the Independent Motion Picture Company, known as Imp—was effective in separating the economic power of the individual actor as celebrity from the rest of the film industry. He staged the “death” of the Biograph Girl, Florence Lawrence, through a press release to news outlets throughout North America. Three days later, he staged her reappearance in St. Louis, which included an exclusive feature interview and full-length photo of the star. Within that interview, certain personal details about Florence Lawrence were released that circumvented the Biograph Studios ban on the release of names or information about its film actors. Her audience learned of her love of horseback riding and of the stage, along with other details of her early life.¹² The publicity agent has continued to assume this role of enlarging the meaning of any actor in the public sphere and expanding the audience’s knowledge and desire for knowledge of the celebrity’s personal life.¹³ Walker considers the creation of the film star as public property an industry that was very quickly “10,000” times larger than that found in the theatrical trade: there were more photos, more venues, more fan and movie magazines, and the power of simultaneous releases made the extratextual business of film star publicity central to the entire industry. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the extratextual discourse concerning movies and their stars in Hollywood was estimated by one writer to involve a hundred thousand words a day. In terms of quantity, this made Hollywood the third-largest source of information, behind Washington, D.C., and New York City. Also between the 1920s and the 1950s, roughly five thousand correspondents were stationed in Hollywood to feed the world the secrets of the stars.¹⁴

The Independence of the Film Celebrity

At various times in the history of film, the film star has operated as a symbol of the independent individual in modern society. This crucial symbolic value has demonstrated and reinforced the ide-

ology of potential that is housed in all members of capitalist culture to supersede the constraints of institutions for the true expression of personal freedom. As film stars transformed into the clear economic center of film production between 1910 and 1920, they became able to determine the form and content of that production and thus began to act independently.¹⁵ By 1919, a group of film stars that included Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford, and Douglas Fairbanks demanded salaries and contracts that could no longer be supported by any studio. Along with director D. W. Griffith, they organized their own production and distribution company, United Artists, in order to control their own films.¹⁶ Although the company had limited success in its early years, the existence of United Artists nevertheless underlined the top film stars’ ability to express the independence of their wills and desires. It is interesting to note that the expression of independent will in the form of United Artists eventually adopted the corporate structure of the other major film companies.¹⁷

The economic independence of the film celebrity has always operated as a symbol of freedom within the industry and for the public. The ability to own a mansion, the opportunity to partake of prohibitively expensive forms of leisure, like yachting or polo, and the time to travel widely are some of the kinds of privileges associated with stardom. They are the rewards of an industry that is connected to a paying public through the perceived “qualities” of its stars.

For the industry, the stars’ economic value transcends the nature of their work and thus their wages far outstrip those earned by generally unionized film workers. The celebrity’s independent connection to the audience permits the configuration of a separate system of value for his or her contribution to any film. This connection to the audience is on an affective or emotional level that defies clear-cut quantification of its economic import. In recent film history, the star’s wage has become one of the principal costs of production. For a star of the first order, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Cruise, Meryl Streep, or Dustin Hoffman, contracts of between \$2 million and \$5 million are not uncommon. Over and above salary, a star may also receive a percentage of the box-office receipts.¹⁸ In such an arrangement, not only is the star guaranteed a very high salary, he or she is also permitted to be involved in the creation of surplus value or profits, like the corporation itself. The star has become an individualized corporate entity, with recognizable brand and hoped-for audience loyalty. Kevin

Costner's involvement in *Waterworld* (1995) best articulates this corporate quality of the star. As production costs soared, Costner renegotiated his fee of \$12.5 million by forfeiting his 15 percent share of the gross receipts over and above his fee in order that the film would actually be completed as planned. In this instance, through his financial stake in the film's production, the star operated in virtual partnership with Universal Studios.¹⁹

The capacity of the star to conform to the form of a company entails the celebrity's commitment to the organization of capital and the general operation of the film industry. The independence of the current top film celebrities is built on a long history of film studio development of their stars. From the 1920s to the 1950s, the studio system of star-making machinery was in place. By 1930, the consolidation of the industry established five major studios and three minor studios in Hollywood. The major studios not only produced films but also distributed them and owned the exhibiting theaters. Their performers, particularly the women, were often signed at young ages to long binding contracts that stipulated they could appear only in their own studios' productions. As young performers, their transcendent power and related connection to the audience, as discussed above, were virtually nonexistent. They depended on the studios to provide them with venues and film "vehicles" in order to establish their unique economic value. Not surprisingly, the studios always had surpluses of potential stars who could be featured or relegated to the filmic version of a chorus line. The stable of actor/stars affiliated with each studio defined the dependent relationship any new Hollywood actor had to his or her studio. Once an actor was able to establish an affective relationship with the movie audience, he or she could enjoy the benefits of being an economic center of the studio system. The film actor in this process exited the private world of studio politics and entered the public world of film exhibition.

Agents representing actor/stars since Laemmle have worked at the interstices of the private and public realms of the movie industry. The agent's fundamental intention is to construct the star as a clearly separate economic entity, quite distinct from any individual film and any studio. The agent intervenes in the typical employer-employee relationship that the studio attempts to maintain to articulate the closer relationship the star has to the audience compared with either the movie or the studio. The agent actively works to shift the economic

ground so that it is centered on the public construction of the star and away from the studio's original construction and investment in the star. At times, the work of the agent may be in concert with the publicity and promotional work of the film studio. However, when contracts are negotiated, the public nature of the film celebrity's power is the working space of the agent.

The centrality of the Hollywood agent in the separation of the star from the exigencies of the studio is significant. The way in which the film industry now operates with its most famous celebrities demonstrates a general industrywide consciousness of the star's independence and closer connection to an audience. Films often become centered on the star in terms of narrative and financing. For instance, if a star of the stature (i.e., audience allure) of Mel Gibson agrees to be involved in a proposed picture, then the financing of the production becomes all the more realizable. The story may also be adjusted to conform to the public's representation of the star, so that the audience's expectations are met. The film character and the star's public personality may be coordinated so that a continuity is maintained and reinforced.

The building of the public personality of the film celebrity is the work of the agent, whose job it is to forge an independent relationship between the star and the audience. The activity of creating a celebrity from film involves coordinating the reading of the star by the audience outside of the film. The character in the film may set the heroic type that the star embodies, but the relationship to the real person behind the image completes the construction of the celebrity. It is the solving by the audience of the enigma of the star's personality that helps formulate the celebrity: the audience wants to know the authentic nature of the star beyond the screen. Through reading the extratextual reports about a particular film celebrity, the audience knits together a coherent though always incomplete celebrity identity.²⁰

Film celebrities' identities, which are made by the audience from the material of interviews, media reports, images, and films, are invested with conceptions of freedom, independence, and individuality. The stars' luxurious lifestyles, many depicted in a syndicated television program devoted entirely to this theme (Robin Leach's *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*), would seem to distance the film celebrities from the everyday experiences of their audiences. And, indeed, the stars of the 1920s had an ethereal quality that placed them quite above their