

# Unstable Symbols

On the representativeness of film stars

Part Two

# Introduction

- I shall discuss the way a number of stars have been invested with cultural significance by film scholars.
- I shall also argue that the attribution of cultural significance to film stars is a significant cultural practice associated with stardom, one that deserves academic attention from star scholars.
- Concentrating on two specific groups of stars, 1950s' sex symbols and 1980s' body-builder action stars, I'm going to consider the extent to which they have been written about as representative of social types and values, judged to be symptomatic of particular sets of social conditions and cultural contradictions.

# Sex Symbols

- Much of the research on sex symbols is indebted to Dyer's case study of Marilyn Monroe in *Heavenly Bodies*
- Diana Holmes, "'A Girl of Today': Brigitte Bardot,' in J. Gaffney and D. Holmes (eds), *Stardom in Postwar France* (2007: 40-66).
- Stephen Gundle, 'Sophia Loren, Cultural Icon', reprinted in L. Fisher and M. Landy (eds), *Stars: The Film Reader*, (1995/2004: 77-96).
- Pam Cook, 'The trouble with sex: Diana Dors and the blonde bombshell phenomenon,' in B. Babington (ed.), *British Stars and Stardom* (2001: 167-78).
- Christine Geraghty, 'Diana Dors,' in C. Barr (ed.) *All Our Yesterdays* (1986: 341-45).
- Sex symbols are deemed to symbolize race and class as much as sex and gender

# Blonde Bombshell: Diana Dors

- Pam Cook claims that she:
  - played a significant role in the redefinition of cultural attitudes during the 1950s
  - encapsulated cultural and social values
  - was emblematic of conflicting social forces
  - acquired iconic status
- Pam Cook, 'The trouble with sex: Diana Dors and the blonde bombshell phenomenon,' in B. Babington (ed.), *British Stars and Stardom* (2001: 167-78).



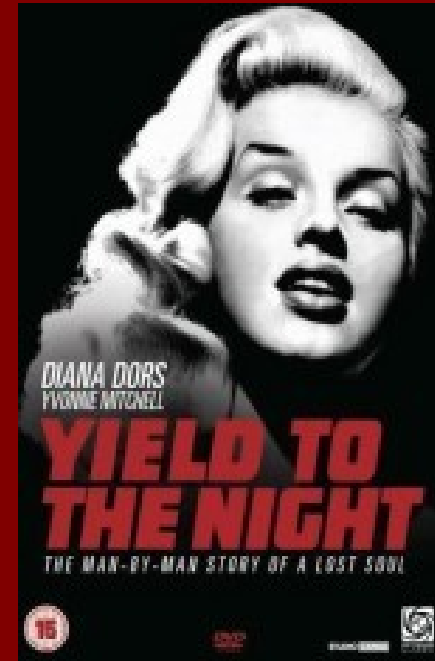
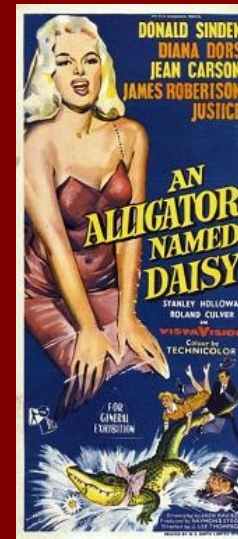
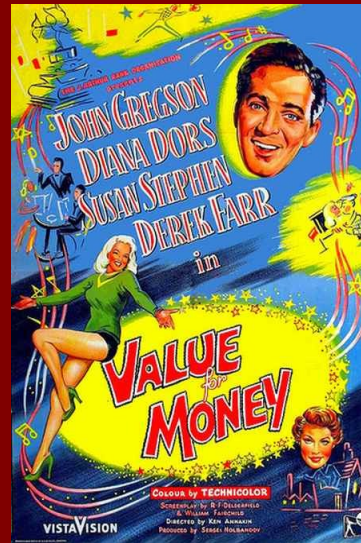
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# Diana Dors



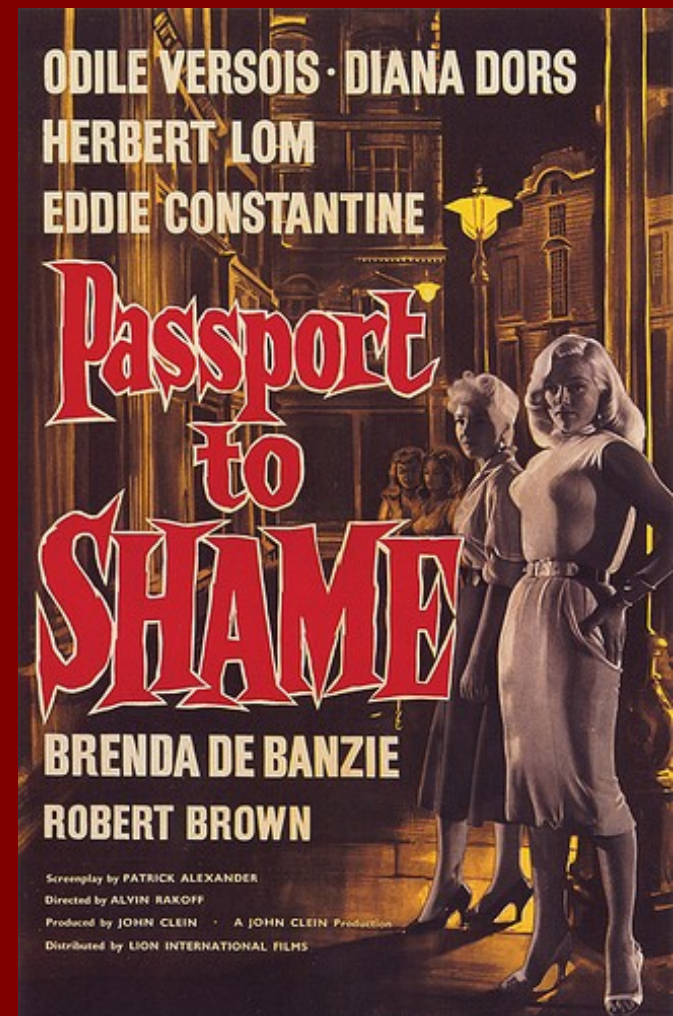
- Dors emerges as both a national and international symbol (i.e., an ambiguous national icon)



# *Passport to Shame* (1959)



Melanie Bell, *Femininity in the Frame* (2010, 147)



# New Wave Women





# DD: a National Icon?



- Doris emerges as being quintessentially part of the 1950s (even though she survived as a star/celebrity into the 1980s)
- The 'blonde bombshell' provoked ambivalent reactions, being simultaneously:
  - a feminine ideal and a travesty
  - a valuable and de-valued commodity
  - A reactionary and transgressive figure



# Post-Sixties Sex Symbols



# Ambivalent Arnie

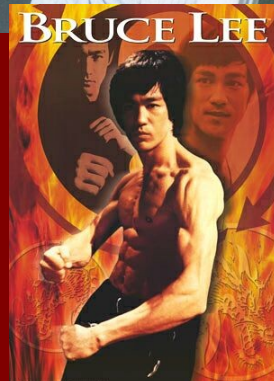


# Muscle-bound Action Stars

- 1980/90s body-built action stars (e.g., Schwarzenegger, Stallone, Van Damme et al) have replaced the 1950s sex symbols.
- Yvonne Tasker's *Spectacular Bodies* (1993) built directly on Dyer's work on Marilyn Monroe in *Heavenly Bodies* (1987)
- Tasker reads body-built stars as personifying cultural crises in masculinity (anti-feminist and anti-gay)
- She notes significant contradictions (i.e., heterosexist masculine icons but feminized and eroticized)

# National, Racial & Ethnic Variants

- White American
- Black American
- White European
- Chinese
- Indian



# Unstable Symbols

- Reductionist, over-simplified and reflectionist?
- Contextualising the meaning of stars is always open to the charge of presenting a simple 'reflectionist' history of stardom: societies change historically and stars reflect those changes. ... This raises questions of what defines and delimits a 'context' and what forms of context are to be judged as of most relevance to the study of stardom. Such questions do not make historical studies of stars impossible, only provisional (Paul McDonald, 'Reconceptualising Stardom,' in R. Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd Edition, 1998: 179).

# Non-reflectionist

- Dyer's objective was 'to find a way of understanding the social significance of stars which fully respects the way they function as media texts, yet does not fall into a view of a given star as simply reflecting some aspect of social reality that the analyst cared to name' (Dyer, Preface to *Heavenly Bodies*, 1987: ix).

# Gracie Fields



- Gracie Fields has been read as representative of liberated working-class women from Rochdale in Northern England before the Second World War.
- See Marcia Landy, 'The extraordinary ordinariness of Gracie Fields: the anatomy of a British film star,' in *British Stars and Stardom* (ed.) Bruce Babington, 2001: 56-67

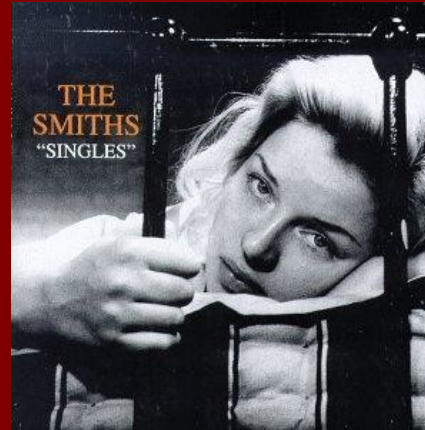
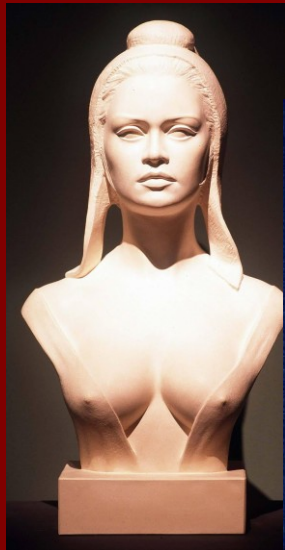


# (Un-)Representative?

- Stars' relationship to representation is complicated by their mix of typicality and uniqueness, their ordinary and extraordinary qualities
- Stars exist as representation (i.e., within the realm of representation: namely, publicity and films)
- Stars are remote, removed from reality (i.e. the real world).



# Conclusions



- Sex symbols (e.g., blonde bombshells) and body-built action stars appear to incarnate cultural fantasies of sex, gender, class and race.
- They are time-sensitive (i.e., zeitgeist icons), hence over-valued in one era, de-valued in another.
- They symbolize the atypical and extraordinary nature of stardom

# Final Conclusions

- Representation is a key debate within star studies, one that divides opinion.
- Stars are symbolic and representative in various ways but their cultural significance is shifting, complex and unstable.
- Critics, commentators, historians and scholars often attempt to clarify and fix a star's significance, rendering it more stable than it ever was or ever can be.

# Concluding comments on the course

