

FEMININE FASCINATIONS

Forms of identification in star-audience relations

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THE LOST AUDIENCE

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

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

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

of this period, which was, as well, a time of changing definitions of femininity in Hollywood and in society generally.

The enthusiastic response of over 300 letters, including some from Canada, the United States and Australia, testifies to the continuing significance of Hollywood stars in women's lives and imaginations. Many letters were several pages long and offered detailed recollections of particular favourite stars, as well as of the cinema generally during this period. Respondents included photos, scrapbooks and original newspaper cuttings about their favourite stars, as well as detailing their appeal in their own words. The letters covered a broad range of topics including how much the cinema, and stars in particular, meant in women's lives; the role of the cinema in wartime Britain; why women stopped being fans of stars; and the particular pleasures of the cinema experience in the context of the 1940s and 1950s. This chapter looks firstly at the reasons for the continued absence of the audience from film studies and then offers some preliminary findings from research in progress into aspects of the relationship between female Hollywood stars and women in the audience.

Within film studies generally, the study of stars has remained predominantly textual. Although Dyer's work challenges some of the existing boundaries of film studies, by linking textual models of semiotic and narrative analysis to a sociological approach to stars, very few studies have succeeded in developing this project in relation to questions about cinema audiences. Analyses of stars have continued to focus on the production of particular significations within the film text, or within other aspects of the cinema industry such as publicity, rather than on how audiences might read them within particular cultural and historical contexts.²

There is surprisingly little feminist work on Hollywood stars, and even less on their audiences. Attention to genre (especially melodrama, the woman's film and film noir), to narratives (especially those reproducing the oedipal drama) and to forms of looking (especially voyeurism and fetishism) have tended to dominate the feminist agendas of the 1980s. It is especially puzzling that stars have remained a relatively undeveloped aspect of Hollywood cinema within feminist work since female stars might seem an obvious focus for the analysis of the construction of idealised femininities within patriarchal culture. In the work which has emerged, feminist film theorists have also tended to reproduce a textual analysis of stars. Despite their very different theoretical positions, the two key perspectives within feminist film theory, namely the 'images of women'³ approach and the 'woman as image'⁴ approach, have also shared a common reliance on textual analysis, ignoring the role of the audience in the cinema.

Molly Haskell, for example, discusses the female stars in Hollywood cinema in terms of stereotypes which limit and control definitions of

femininity in a male dominated culture. She contrasts, for example, the 'treacherous woman', associated with stars such as Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* and *The Lady from Shanghai* with the 'superfemale', such as Bette Davis in *Jezebel*, who, 'while exceedingly "feminine" and flirtatious, is too ambitious and intelligent for the docile role society has decreed she play', and with the 'superwoman' who 'instead of exploiting her femininity, adopts male characteristics in order to enjoy male prerogatives, or simply to survive'.⁵ This latter female type is exemplified by stars such as Katharine Hepburn and Joan Crawford and is different again from the 'sweet and innocent' type, associated with June Allyson, Olivia de Havilland and Judy Garland: 'For every hard-boiled dame there was a soft-boiled sweetheart...'⁶ Although Haskell's analysis refers outside the film texts to feminine stereotypes in society generally, and to a patriarchal culture in whose interest they are perpetuated, Haskell's discussion of the stars themselves is restricted to the characters portrayed and their narrative treatment in the films.

The other approach to stars within feminist film criticism has been the investigation of female stars as objects of the 'male' gaze. Laura Mulvey, for example, analyses Sternberg's use of Dietrich as the 'ultimate fetish' in her well-known essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema':

The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look.⁷

This fetishism of the female star within Hollywood cinema is one form of scopophilia (or pleasure in looking) offered to the spectator, the other is the voyeuristic pleasure in the objectification of the female star on the screen. To illustrate this latter process, Mulvey discusses the heroines of Hitchcock's films who are constructed as passive objects of the sadistic controlling voyeurism of the male protagonist, and, by extension, the spectator: 'The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to the gaze voyeuristically is turned onto the woman as object of both.'⁸

Little attention, then, has been paid to female stars in Hollywood by feminist film theorists outside the ways in which the stars function within the film text.⁹ There are, however, a few exceptions which have tried to bring together textual analysis either with ethnographic investigation or with a historical contextualisation of audiences. Helen Taylor's recent book *Scarlett's Women*, for example, analyses audiences' readings of Vivien Leigh in *Gone with the Wind*.¹⁰ Jane Gaines has examined the different definitions of femininity constructed in 1940s fan magazines through which female stars could be read.¹¹ Angela Partington, whilst maintaining the focus on genre,

offers a convincing analysis of the place of female stars in the production of an ‘excess’ of femininity in melodrama in the 1950s, which can only be understood in relation to other representations and consumer practices, not solely in terms of its own textual operations.¹² Finally, in *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer offers a reading of Judy Garland’s star image through discourses of gay male subculture. Based on responses to an advert, Richard Dyer’s analysis demonstrates the importance of meanings produced outside the film text to the readings audiences make of Hollywood stars. Indeed there could not be better evidence to illustrate the argument against textual determinism, since the readings made by these fans are so clearly based not just outside the film text, or even the cinema, but outside mainstream culture itself, and within a subculture which reverses and parodies dominant meanings.¹³

Investigating audiences

Whilst these studies show that work on audiences is developing,¹⁴ there remain several difficulties in this emerging area of work. One of the particular difficulties with analysing audiences from past decades is that they are not easily accessible. What then are the possible sources for their investigation?¹⁵ First, box-office statistics can give us an indication of which films, and perhaps which stars, were popular and when. Film magazines such as *Cinematograph Weekly*, or *Picturegoer*, ran popularity polls on stars, and these may also indicate in more detail which stars were favoured, when, and for how long. Other surveys done at the time may indicate who went to which films and why, such as the work at the Mass Observation Archive at Sussex University,¹⁶ or the market research produced for commercial reasons, or the sociological research on the ‘effects’ of films on audiences. Sometimes this information is broken down according to class and gender divisions, which enables conclusions to be drawn about which genres were popular among specific audiences, for example.¹⁷ However, this information, whilst it may give a broad indication of likes or dislikes, offers little insight into the more qualitative dimensions of those preferences.

A richer source of information which offers more details on preferences and audiences’ tastes has been what audiences wrote about stars at the time. Letters pages in film magazines contain examples of audience opinion about stars, as well as about other issues. Magazines’ and newspapers’ letters pages typically include complaints, criticism, appreciation and likes and dislikes letters. They are generally responding to an article or feature on a particular star, film or director, or to controversial questions set up by the editor. The most popular magazine of this kind in the 1940s and 1950s, *Picturegoer*, for example, regularly featured provocative pieces such as ‘Charm not Curves’

by Vincent Keene, which questioned what constituted desirable femininity.¹⁸ The letters pages in the weeks following were full of differing and wide ranging answers to this question. Letters from readers could be a useful indicator of audiences' preferences and responses to stars, bearing in mind that the topics raised in the letters are shaped by the magazine as a whole and its own editorial criteria. The mode of the magazine thus produces very particular generic conventions through which the readers' letters are channelled.

In addition, the editorial decisions about which letters get published clearly determine what kinds of opinions we can have access to now.¹⁹ Thus letters pages in weekly magazines are interesting in terms of studying the magazine and its role in framing Hollywood in Britain, but less useful in terms of offering detailed sources on audiences.

Fan clubs offer another source of information about audiences in the 1940s and 1950s, but these are often difficult to trace, and much of the fan mail written at this time has been lost or destroyed. The fan clubs which responded to my letters of enquiry said they no longer possessed such old fan mail from Britain.

The final possibility for investigating audiences of the 1940s and 1950s is to analyse people's memories and recollections of the cinema at that time. Yet, as is true of all the sources discussed so far, the rules of enquiry frame the kind of information elicited. Answers to an advertisement asking for recollections of favourite stars inevitably produce a particular set of representations, which are clearly framed by a specific cultural context. First, in my own case, the research concerns women's *memories* of Hollywood stars. The kinds of selections respondents make when remembering what Hollywood stars meant in their lives are therefore mediated in a particular way. Which stars are remembered and how they are remembered must additionally be influenced by the cultural constructions of those stars since that time. For example, audiences may remember stars differently depending on whether the stars are still alive, and if not, how they died (e.g. Marilyn Monroe); whether they still have a fan club (e.g. Deanna Durbin); whether the star continued to have a successful career (e.g. Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis); whether their films have been shown frequently on television and indeed whether the stars went on to have a television career (e.g. Barbara Stanwyck).

In addition to these factors, memory introduces a particular kind of selection process. What gets remembered and what gets forgotten may depend not only on the star's career since the time period specified, but also upon the identity of the cinema spectator. Having asked women to write about female stars, the kinds of representations offered will be informed by issues such as self-image and self-perception, particularly in relation to

gender identity. The different constructions of femininity within Hollywood, such as the power and rebelliousness of Bette Davis or the sexual attractiveness of Marilyn Monroe, or the clean-livingness of Deanna Durbin may have particular appeal in retrospect, and may have come to mean something over the years which it did not in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰

It is this final approach to historical audiences that I am using in this chapter. In particular I want to explore one of the recurring themes of the letters which were sent to me by women in response to my advertisement: the processes of identification at stake in the exchange between female stars and the female spectator. I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the relationship between stars and spectators not only because of its recurrence as a theme in the letters, but also because of its theoretical centrality within feminist criticisms of Hollywood cinema.

A QUESTION OF IDENTIFICATION

The term 'identification' has been central to many debates within psychoanalytic theory and film studies. Within psychoanalytic theory, 'identification' has been seen as the key mechanism for the production of identities. Freud analysed the unconscious mechanisms through which the self is constituted in relation to external objects. In her paper 'Identification and the Star: A Refusal of Difference', Anne Friedberg quotes Freud on identification:

First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie, as it were by means of introjection of the object into the ego; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of sexual instinct. The more important this common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie.²¹

The role of vision in identification has always been part of the Freudian formulation (the emphasis on the moment of the sight of sexual difference, for example) but the 'specular role of identification' has taken centre stage in Lacan's theories of the mirror phase, through which subjects are 'constituted through a specular misrecognition of an *other*'.²²

These models of identification employed within psychoanalysis to explore the developments of unconscious identities have been seen by some film theorists, such as Christian Metz,²³ as analogous to the cinematic experience of spectatorship. As Friedberg outlines:

Primary identification as Metz describes it (as distinct from Freud's 'original and emotional tie') means a spectator who identifies with both camera and projector, and like the child positioned in front of the mirror, constructs an imaginary notion of wholeness, of a unified body.... Secondary identification is with an actor, character or star ... any body becomes an opportunity for an identificatory investment, a possible suit for the substitution/misrecognition of self.²⁴

Psychoanalytic film theorists have thus developed a complex analysis of cinematic identification, based on an analogy between the construction of individual identities in infancy in relation to others, and the process of watching a film on a screen. Whilst this may be an appealing analogy, especially given the centrality of the specular in later psychoanalytic accounts of the development of identity, the question remains as to the validity of such a straightforward transposition: how similar are these processes, and what is being left out of the account of spectatorship by focusing so exclusively on its psychic dimensions? Such a framework offers limited purchase on understanding cinematic identification, with no evidence other than a conceptual analogy of the processes occurring in individual psyches.

In film studies more generally, the term 'identification' has been widely used to suggest a broader set of processes. Drawing on literary analysis, identification has often been used rather loosely to mean sympathising or engaging with a character. It has also been used in relation to the idea of 'point of view', watching and following the film from a character's point of view. This involves not only *visual* point of view, constructed by type of shot, editing sequences and so on, but also *narrative* point of view, produced through the sharing of knowledge, sympathy or moral values with the protagonist. Identification has thus been used as a kind of common-sense term within film and literary studies, referring to a very diverse set of processes, and has yet to be adequately theorised in a manner which provides a satisfactory alternative to the more reductive psychoanalytic models.

Interestingly, feminist writing on the subject of identification in relation to gender identities has developed in two opposing directions. On the one hand, the psychoanalytically informed film criticism following Laura Mulvey's original attack on the visual pleasure of narrative cinema is still marked by a suspicion of any kind of feminine role model, heroine or image of identification. Mulvey's films (such as *Amy!*, 1980), as well as her influential theoretical work, have advocated a rejection of the conventions of popular representations, not simply for the images of femininity constructed, but also for the processes of identification offered to the cinema spectator. 'Identification' itself has been seen as a cultural process complicit with the

reproduction of dominant culture by reinforcing patriarchal forms of identity. Anne Freidberg sums up what feminists have seen as the problematic functions of identification thus:

Identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of an existing form. The institutional sanction of stars as ego ideals also operates to establish normative figures. Identification enforces a collapse of the subject onto the normative demand for sameness, which, under patriarchy, is always male.²⁵

On the other hand, some feminist cultural theorists have attempted to rescue the process of identification from such criticism, and have instead drawn attention to the empowerment through certain forms of identification within the consumption of popular culture. Valerie Walkerdine, for example, offers an analysis of the way the different members of a working-class family read *Rocky II*, which demonstrates the shifting significance of the metaphor of fighting in Rocky's character.²⁶ Gender differences produce different and conflicting identifications in Walkerdine and the family members; nevertheless identification is reclaimed in Walkerdine's analysis as potentially producing rebellious feelings and a desire to fight the dominant system, as well as being a necessary aspect of cultural consumption.

These two perspectives, then, represent opposite positions on processes of identification in the visual media: the first criticises identification of any kind for reproducing sameness, fixity and the confirmation of existing identities, whilst the second reclaims it as potentially empowering and expressive of resistance. They coincide, however, in taking psychoanalytic accounts of identification as central to their understanding of spectatorship.

Whilst there are detailed psychoanalytic accounts of the psychic processes of identification,²⁷ however, there has been less investigation of the broader cultural and social dimensions of identification in the cinema. Therefore instead of applying psychoanalytic theory to a film text to investigate identification in the cinema, I shall take the audiences' representations of this process and its meanings as my starting point. This is not to argue that audiences are the source of 'the true meanings' of films or of stars; clearly audiences' recollections are themselves a highly mediated set of cultural representations, as I have discussed above. Instead, the purpose of this investigation is to look at the production of the meaning of stars in the terms of how audiences construct them.

Particularly striking in the letters I received was the diversity of processes represented which could loosely be termed identification. To the extent that identification involves various processes which negotiate the boundaries

between self and other,²⁸ these processes take on a particular significance in the context of popular cinema where women in the audience are offered idealised images of femininity in many different forms. Some of these quite clearly relate back to the psychic processes described by psychoanalysis, and others move into the domain of cultural consumption more generally.

There is a problem finding a term to refer to the women in the audience whose letters are used in this analysis. The term 'female spectator', used so widely within feminist film theory, has been a confusing one; it has been used to refer both to the textual positions constructed by the film, and, often implicitly, to the female members of the cinema audience.²⁹ At best it is acknowledged that the two processes may, to some extent, be separate, but generally an implicit textual determinism defines assumptions about spectatorship.³⁰ In addition, the singularity of the reference of the term spectator implies a unified viewing experience, and its usage carries with it a very passive model of how audiences watch films.

I am using 'spectator' here in a rather different way to refer to members of the cinema audience. However, there is a further problem using the term to discuss practices which take place beyond the cinema, since spectator, in this broader sense, refers to a person still in the cinema. This is itself symptomatic of the limited interest in what spectatorship might mean outside or beyond the cinema experience. Spectatorship, when considered as an aspect of cultural consumption, should no longer be seen simply as an extension of a film text replicating infantile misrecognition, nor as an isolated viewing process, but rather as part of a more general cultural construction of identities.

The analysis of the letters which follows is divided into two sections. The first addresses processes of identification which involve fantasies about the relationship between the identity of the star and the identity of the spectator. On the whole these forms of identification relate to the cinematic context. The second section examines forms of identification which involve practice as well as fantasy, in that spectators actually transform some aspect of their identity as a result of their relationship to their favourite star. These practices extend beyond the cinema itself and thus spectatorship is considered in relation to the construction of feminine identities more generally.

Cinematic identificatory fantasies

Devotion and worship

I wanted to write and tell you of my devotion to my favourite star Doris Day. I thought she was fantastic, and joined her fan club,

collected all the photos and info I could. I saw *Calamity Jane* 45 times in a fortnight and still watch all her films avidly. My sisters all thought I was mad going silly on a woman, but I just thought she was wonderful, they were mad about Elvis, but my devotion was to Doris Day. (V.M.)

Some letters do not even mention the self, but simply offer evidence of devotion to a female star. However, this is unusual; most letters I received framed their comments on stars in relation to their own identities. In this first group, many of the letters speak of the pleasure produced by some kind of difference from the star, the distance produced by this difference providing a source of fascination. Stars are frequently written about as out of reach, and belonging to a different world or plane of existence:

Film stars...seemed very special people, glamorous, handsome and way above us ordinary mortals. (J.T.) I'll never forget the first time I saw her, it was in *My Gal Sal* in 1942, and her name was Rita Hayworth. I couldn't take my eyes off her, she was the most perfect woman I had ever seen. The old cliché 'screen goddess' was used about many stars, but those are truly the only words that define that divine creature.... I was stunned and amazed that any human being could be that lovely. (V.H.)

Stars were fabulous creatures to be worshipped from afar, every film of one's favourite gobbled up as soon as it came out. (P.K.)

These statements represent the star as something different and unattainable. Religious signifiers here indicate the special status and meaning of the stars, as well as suggesting the intensity of the devotion felt by the spectator. They also reinforce the 'otherness' of the stars who are not considered part of the mortal world of the spectator. The last example, however, does introduce the star into the mortal world by a metaphor of ingestion reminiscent of the act of communion. Worship of stars as goddesses involves a denial of self found in some forms of religious devotion. The spectator is only present in these quotes as a worshipper, or through their adoration of the star. There is no reference to the identity of the spectator or suggestion of closing the gap between star and fan by becoming more like a star; these are simply declarations of appreciation from afar. The boundaries between self and ideal are quite fixed and stable in these examples, and the emphasis is very strongly on the ideal rather than the spectator. Even in the last statement, where the self is implicit in that the star is to be gobbled up, the star none the less remains the subject of the sentence.

The desire to become

In other examples, the relationship between star and audience is also articulated through the recognition of an immutable difference between star and spectator: 'Bette Davis was the epitome of what we would like to be, but knew we never could!' (N.T.). Yet here the desire to move across that difference and become more like the star is expressed, even if this is accompanied by the impossibility of its fulfilment.³¹ The distance between the spectator and her ideal seems to produce a kind of longing which offers fantasies of transformed identities.

These desires to become more like the stars occur on several levels. Many of them are predictably articulated in relation to appearance:

I finally kept with Joan Crawford—every typist's dream of how they'd like to look. (M.R.)

And of course her [Betty Grable's] clothes—how could a young girl not want to look like that? (S.W.)

Although I wished to look like a different star each week depending what film I saw, I think my favourite was Rita Hayworth, I always imagined, if I could look like her I could toss my red hair into the wind... and meet the man of my dreams...(R.A.)

Clearly, stars serve a normative function to the extent that they are often read as role models, contributing to the construction of the ideals of feminine attractiveness circulating in culture at any one time. The age difference between the star and the younger fans is central here: stars provide ideals of femininity for adolescent women in the audience, preoccupied with attaining adult femininity. Part of this kind of identification involves recognising desirable qualities in the ideal and wanting to move towards it:

Doris Day...seemed to epitomise the kind of person who, with luck, I as a child could aspire to be. (B.C.)

I loved to watch Deanna Durbin. I used to put myself in her place. She lived in a typical girl's dream. (J.G.)

These examples demonstrate not simply the desire to overcome the gap between spectator and star, but a fantasy of possible movement between the two identities, from the spectator to the star.

Pleasure in feminine power

However, the difference between the female star and the female spectator is a source of fascination not only with ideals of physical beauty, but also with

the stars' personalities and behaviour, which are often admired or envied by spectators. These identifications demonstrate the contradictory pleasures offered by Hollywood stars, on the one hand reproducing normative models of feminine glamour, whilst on the other hand offering women fantasies of resistance. For example, some female stars represented images of power and confidence. These were frequent favourites because they offered spectators fantasies of power outside their own experience.

We liked stars who were most different to ourselves and Katharine Hepburn, with her self-assured romps through any situation was one of them. We were youngsters at the time, and were anything but self confident, and totally lacking in sophistication, so, naturally, Bette Davis took the other pedestal. She who could be a real 'bitch', without turning a hair, and quelled her leading men with a raised eyebrow and sneer at the corners of her mouth...(N.T.)

Bette Davis...was great, I loved how she walked across the room in her films, she seemed to have a lot of confidence and she had a look of her own, as I think a lot of female stars had at that time... (E.M.)

Powerful female stars often play characters in punishing patriarchal narratives, where the woman is either killed off, or married, or both, but these spectators do not seem to select this aspect of their films to write about. Instead, the qualities of confidence and power are remembered as offering pleasure to female spectators in something they lack and desire.

Identification and escapism

This movement from spectator to star is part of the pleasure of escapism articulated in many of the letters. Instead of the difference between the spectator and the star being recognised and maintained, the difference provides the possibility for the spectator to leave her world temporarily and become part of the star's world.³²

It made no difference to me if the film was ushered in by a spangled globe, the Liberty Lady or that roaring lion, I was no longer in my seat but right up there fleeing for my life from chasing gangsters, skimming effortlessly over silver ice, or singing high and sweet like a lark. (D.H.)

I was only a girl, but I could be transported from the austerity and gloom of that time to that other world on the silver screen. (J.T.)

Joan Crawford—could evoke such pathos, and suffer such martyrdom...making you live each part. (M.B.)

In these examples, the movement from self to other is more fluid than in the previous categories, and this fluidity provides the well-known pleasure of the cinema: ‘losing oneself’ in the film. Here, in contrast to the distinction between self and ideal maintained in the processes of spectatorship discussed above, the spectator’s identity merges with the star in the film, or the character she is portraying.

In this first section I have discussed processes of spectatorship which involve negotiating the difference between the star and the spectator in various ways: beginning with the denial of self, in favour of praising the screen goddesses, and moving on to the desire to become like the star, but realising the impossibility of such desires, and ending with the pleasure in overcoming the difference and merging with the ideal on the screen.

Extra-cinematic identificatory practices

Now I want to move on to discuss representations which concern what I shall call ‘identificatory practices’ of spectatorship. These nearly all relate to forms of identification which take place outside the cinematic context. These practices also involve the audience engaging in some kind of practice of transformation of the self to become more like the star they admire, or to involve others in the recognition of their similarity with the star.

Pretending

...there was a massive open-cast coal site just at the tip of our estate—there were 9 of us girls—and we would go to the site after school, and play on the mounds of soil removed from the site. The mounds were known to us as ‘Beverley Hills’ and we all had lots of fun there. Each of us had our own spot where the soil was made into a round—and that was our mansion. We played there for hours—visiting one mansion after another and each being our own favourite film star...(M.W.)

I really loved the pictures, they were my life, I used to pretend I was related to Betty Grable because my name was Betty, and I used to get quite upset when the other children didn’t believe me. (B.C.)

Pretending to be particular film stars involves an imaginary practice, but one where the spectator involved knows that it is a game. This is rather different from the processes of escapism in the cinema discussed above whereby the spectator feels completely absorbed in the star’s world and which thus

involves a temporary collapsing of the self into the star identity. The first example given above is also different in that it involves a physical as well as an imaginary transformation. Furthermore pretending does not simply involve the privatised imagination of the individual spectator, as in the process of escapism, but also involves the participation of other spectators in the collective fantasy games. This kind of representation of the relationship between star and fan is based more on similarity than difference, since the fan takes on the identity of the star in a temporary game of make-believe, and the difference between them is made invisible, despite the recognition of the whole process as one of pretending.

Resembling

Bette Davis—her eyes were fabulous and the way she walked arrogantly... I have dark eyes, in those days I had very large dark eyebrows...and my Dad used to say... ‘Don’t you roll those Bette Davis eyes at me young lady...’ ...Now Doris Day, that’s a different thing—we share the same birthday...(P.O.)

There are numerous points of recognition of similarities between the spectator and the star. These are not based on pretending to be something one is not, but rather selecting something which establishes a link between the star and the self based on a pre-existing part of the spectator’s identity which bears a resemblance to the star. This does not necessarily involve any kind of transformation, but rather a highlighting of star qualities in the individual spectator. The significance of particular features, such as ‘Bette Davis eyes’, seems to exceed physical likeness, to suggest a certain kind of femininity, in this case a rebellious one which represented a challenge to the father’s authority.

Imitating

Unlike the above process of recognising a resemblance to a star, many spectators wrote about practices which involved transforming themselves to be more like the star. This is different from the fantasy of becoming the star whilst viewing a film, or even expressing the desire to become more like the star generally, since it involves an actual imitation of a star or of her particular characteristics in a particular film. In other words this identificatory practice involves a form of pretending or play-acting, and yet it is also different from pretending, since pretending is represented as a process

involving the whole star persona, whereas imitation is used here to indicate a partial taking-on of part of a star's identity.

Several letters gave examples of imitating singing and dancing of favourite stars after the film performance:

We used to go home and do concerts based on the songs and dances we had seen in the films, and one of my friends had an auntie who was a mine of information on the words of songs from films...(B. F.)

The films we saw made us sing and sometimes act our way home on the bus...(J.T.)

My favourite female star was Betty Grable. The songs she sang in the film, I would try to remember, I would sing and dance all the way home...(P.G.)

The imitation of stars was not limited to singing and dancing, but was clearly a pleasure in terms of replicating gestures, speech and star personalities: 'I had my favourites of course.... One week I would tigerishly pace about like Joan Crawford, another week I tried speaking in the staccato tones of Bette Davis and puffing a cigarette at the same time' (D.H.).

Copying

Although imitation and copying are very closely linked as practices, I want to use them here differently to distinguish between audiences *imitating* behaviour and activities, and copying appearances. As the attempted replication of appearance, then, *copying* relates back to the desire to look like stars discussed above. However it is not simply expressed as an unfulfillable desire or pleasurable fantasy, as in the earlier examples, it is also a practice which transforms the spectators' physical appearance.

Copying is the most common form of identificatory practice outside the cinema. Perhaps this is not surprising given the centrality of physical appearance to femininity in general in this culture, and to female Hollywood stars in particular. The 'visual pleasure' offered by the glamour and sexual appeal of Hollywood stars has been thoroughly criticised by feminists elsewhere.³³ Here I am interested in how women audiences related to these ideals of femininity as presented by Hollywood stars on the screen, and particularly in how identification extends beyond individualised fantasies into practices aimed at the transformation of identity.

I was a very keen fan of Bette Davis and can remember seeing her in *Dark Victory*.... That film had such an impact on me. I can remember coming home and looking in the mirror fanatically trying to comb my

hair so that I could look like her. I idolised her... thought she was a wonderful actress. (V.C.)

This process involves an intersection of self and other, subject and object. The impact of the film on the spectator was to produce a desire to resemble physically the ideal. In front of a reflection of herself, the spectator attempts to close the gap between her image and her ideal image, by trying to produce a new image, more like her ideal. In this instance, her hair is the focus of this desired transformation. Indeed hairstyle is one of the most frequently recurring aspects of the star's appearance which the spectators try to copy:

My friends and I would try and copy the hair styles of the stars, sometimes we got it right, and other times we just gave up, as we hadn't the looks of the stars or the money to dress the way they did. (E.M.)

Now Doris Day...I was told many times around that I looked like her, so I had my hair cut in a D.A. style. Jane Wyman was a favourite at one stage and I had hair cut like hers, it was called a tulip.... Now Marilyn Monroe was younger and by this time I had changed my image, my hair was almost white blonde and longer and I copied her hairstyle, as people said I looked like her. (P.O.)

These forms of copying involve some kind of self-transformation to produce an appearance more similar to Hollywood stars. Some spectators clearly have a stronger feeling of their success than others; the first example includes a sense of defeat whilst the last seems to be able to achieve several desired likenesses, especially bearing in mind this respondent is the one who had 'Bette Davis eyes'. The difference then between the star and the spectator is transformable into similarity through the typical work of femininity: the production of oneself simultaneously as subject and object in accordance with cultural ideals of femininity.

Copying and consumption

Copying the hairstyles of famous film stars can be seen as a form of cultural production and consumption. It involves the production of a new self-image through the pleasure taken in a star image. In this last section I want to consider an extension of the identificatory practice of copying where it intersects with the consumption of cultural products in addition to the star image. The construction of women as cinema spectators overlaps here with their construction as consumers.

To some extent copying the hairstyles of the stars overlaps with this. However I have separated hairstyles from other aspects of this process, since changing hairstyles does not necessarily involve the actual purchasing of other products to transform the identity of the spectator, although it may do. The purchasing of items such as clothing and cosmetics in relation to particular stars brings into particularly sharp focus the relationship between the cinema industries and other forms of capitalist industry. Stars are consumable feminine images which female spectators then reproduce through other forms of consumption.

and I bought clothes like hers [Doris Day]...dresses, soft wool, no sleeves, but short jackets, boxy type little hats, half hats we used to call them and low heeled court shoes to match your outfit, kitten heels they were called...as people said I looked like her [Marilyn Monroe] I even bought a suit after seeing her in *Niagara*. (P.O.)

It was fun trying to copy one's favourite stars with their clothes, hats and even make-up, especially the eyebrows. Hats were very much in vogue at that time and shops used to sell models similar to the styles the stars were wearing. I was very much into hats myself and tried in my way (on a low budget) to copy some of them. Naturally I bought a Deanna Durbin model hat and a Rita Hayworth one. (V.C.)

I'd like to name Deanna Durbin as one of my favourite stars. Her beautiful singing voice, natural personality and sparkling eyes made her films so enjoyable, and one always knew she would wear boleros; in one film she wore six different ones. I still like wearing boleros—so you can tell what a lasting effect the clothes we saw on the screen made on us. (J.D.Member of the Deanna Durbin Society)

Stars are thus identified with particular commodities which are part of the reproduction of feminine identities. The female spectators in these examples produce particular images of femininity which remind them of their favourite stars. In so doing they produce a new feminine identity, one which combines an aspect of the star with their own appearance. This is different from imitation, which is more of a temporary reproduction of a particular kind of behaviour which resembles the star. It transforms the spectators' previous appearance, and in doing so offers the spectator the pleasure of close association with her ideal.

As teenagers and young girls we did not have the vast variety of clothing and choices of make-up that is available today, so hairstyles and make-up were studied with great interest and copied... I seem to remember buying a small booklet by Max Factor with pictures of the

stars, M.G.M. mostly, with all the details of their make-up and how to apply it... (E.H.)

Their make-up was faultless and their fashion of the forties platform shoes, half hats with rows of curls showing at the back under the hat... We used to call the shoes 'Carmen Miranda' shoes... I felt like a film star using Lux Toilet soap, advertised as the stars' soap. (V.B.)

Through the use of cosmetic products, then, as well as through the purchasing and use of clothing, spectators take on a part of the stars identity and make it part of their own. The self and the ideal combine to produce another feminine identity, closer to the ideal. This is the direct opposite of the process of identification I began with in the first section, in which the spectator's own identity remained relatively marginal to the description of the pleasure taken in female Hollywood stars. In this final process, the star becomes more marginal and is only relevant in so far as the star identity relates to the spectator's own identity. As has been noted by other commentators, these latter practices demonstrate the importance of understanding Hollywood stars and their audiences in relation to other cultural industries of the 1940s and 1950s.³⁴

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Having outlined some of the different forms of identification in audience-star relationships represented in these letters, it is now important to reconsider some of the earlier models of identification and spectatorship in the light of this research. First, the diversity of processes of identification, including forms of desire, evident in these letters is striking. The idea of a singular process of identification, so often assumed in psychoanalytic film theory, seems unsatisfactory in the light of the range of processes discussed above. In addition, the use of the term 'female spectatorship' to refer to a single positioning by a film text seems equally inappropriate in the light of the diversity of readings of stars by different women in the cinema audiences in the 1940s and 1950s.

As well as categorising the many different kinds of identification in the relationships between audiences and stars, I have also drawn attention to the broad distinction between two different forms of identification: identificatory fantasies (pp. 149–52) and identificatory practices (pp. 153–7). This is not to suggest that the practices do not also involve fantasies, nor that fantasies cannot also be considered as practices. But rather, it is important to extend our understanding of cinematic identification, previously analysed solely at the level of fantasy, to include the practices documented by these spectators,

PICTUREGOER January 22 1953

How do you see Susan?



HERE'S SUSAN HAYWARD as the sculptor saw her—sweet and fresh as a spring morning.

But you'll be seeing her as one of the hardest women in history — playing Messalina in her latest film!

However much Susan may change character, one thing remains familiar: that fabulous complexion. Why? Because she's never changed her mind about what's best for beauty. That means she's never wavered in her choice of the whitest soap—Lux Toilet Soap—to keep the lovely sparkle in her skin.

It's the snowy, white look of Lux Toilet Soap that tells you worlds about its purity. You can be sure that it is mild, is gentle—and that every day of Lux Toilet Soap care proves your first impression right!

When 9 out of 10 film stars use it, you can be sure that pure, white Lux Toilet Soap lives up to its appearance!



"DIVINELY FRAGRANT!"
Film star Susan Hayward sings the praises of Lux Toilet Soap's exciting perfume, which lingers so deliciously on the skin. In the new French hand-shaped, and easy to hold tablet for long-lasting economy, as well as the familiar size.



SUSAN HAYWARD sees her usual charming self, captured in sculpture. You'll see her in another guise, as wicked Messalina in the new 20th CENTURY FOX FILM "DEMETRIUS AND THE GLADIATORS."

9 out of 10 film stars use pure, white Lux Toilet Soap

A LEYER PRODUCT

Figure 12.1 Lux advertisement, from *Picturegoer*, 22 January 1953

in order to understand the different forms of overlap between stars' and

audiences' identities.

Another significant distinction is that between cinematic identification, which refers to the viewing experience, and extra-cinematic identification, referring to the use of stars' identities in a different cultural time and space. So far, film studies has, not surprisingly, been concerned with the former. However, the importance of these extra-cinematic forms of identification to the women who wrote to me came across very forcefully in their letters. Not only was this one of the most written-about aspects of the relationship between stars and audiences, but the pleasure and force of feeling with which they recalled the details of the significance of stars in this context was also striking.

All the above forms of identification relate to a final distinction which I have used to frame the sequence of the quotations: identification based on difference and identification based on similarity. The early categories of identification concern processes where the differences between the star and the spectator produce the sources of pleasure and fascination. The representations of these processes tended to emphasise the presence of the star and de-emphasise the identity of the spectator. The later categories concern processes where the similarity, or at least the possibility of closing the gap produced by the differences between stars and spectators, is the source of pleasure expressed. In these examples the reproduction of the spectators' identities tended to be the focus of the commentary. Thus identifications do not merely involve processes of recognition based on similarity, but also involve the productive recognition of differences between femininities.

Indeed the processes of identification articulated most strongly in terms of difference seem to be those relating more directly to the cinematic context where the image of the star is still present on the screen. The processes, and practices, which involve reproducing similarity seem to be those extra-cinematic identifications which take place more in the spectator's more familiar domestic context, where the star's identity is selectively reworked and incorporated into the spectator's new identity. Even in these cases, identification does not simply involve the passive reproduction of existing femininities, but rather an active engagement and production of changing identities.

The assumption behind much of the psychoanalytic work discussed earlier is that identification fixes identities: 'identification can only be made through recognition, and all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of existing form'.³⁵ Many of the examples I have discussed contradict this assumption and demonstrate not only the diversity of existing forms, but also that recognition involves the production of desired identities, rather than simply the confirmation of existing ones. Many forms of identification involve

processes of transformation and the production of new identities, combining the spectator's existing identity with her desired identity and her reading of the star's identity.

This research also challenges the assumption that identification is necessarily problematic because it offers the spectator the illusory pleasure of unified subjectivity. The identifications represented in these letters speak as much about partial recognitions and fragmented replications as they do about the misrecognition of a unified subjectivity in an ego ideal on the screen. Thus, cultural consumption does not necessarily fix identities, destroy differences and confirm sameness. If we take audiences as a starting point for understanding the consumption of stars, the active and productive elements of the star-audience relationships begin to emerge.

In challenging previous models of passive female spectatorship, and demonstrating the diversity and complexity of identifications between stars and women in the audience, however, I am not suggesting feminists look at cultural consumption uncritically. Taking audiences as a starting point can present problems for a feminist analysis: how can we remain critical of the dominant meanings of gender produced by Hollywood, whilst at the same time taking seriously the pleasures female spectators articulate about their favourite stars? Perhaps this problem is itself a reason for the reluctance by feminists to analyse female audiences and their relationship to dominant idealised feminine images, such as Hollywood stars.

In asking women to write to me about the appeal of Hollywood stars, it was inevitable I would receive an enthusiastic response. The discrepancy between the passion with which women spectators wrote about their Hollywood favourites and feminist criticisms of the patriarchal constructions of femininity in Hollywood produces a familiar dilemma for feminists working in many areas of cultural analysis. Simply to use what women wrote to me to illustrate the subordinating operations of patriarchal capitalism seems to me to be overwhelmingly patronising, as well as rather pessimistic. But simply to embrace the enthusiastic spirit of the pleasures they describe would be equally problematic, and would reproduce an uncritical populism which leaves behind crucial feminist insights. It therefore remains a challenge to feminists analysing Hollywood cinema to produce critical accounts of dominant cultural representations whilst at the same time developing theories of female cultural consumption as an active and productive process.

NOTES

Acknowledgements

I would very much like to thank Richard Dyer, Sarah Franklin, Anne Gray, Hilary Hinds, Richard Johnson and Celia Lury for their helpful

comments on earlier drafts of this paper, and their encouragement and support for this research project. I would also like to thank Christine Gledhill for her interest, enthusiasm and patience.

- 1 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London, BFI Publishing, 1979).
- 2 A notable exception to this is Leo Handel's *Hollywood Looks at its Audience* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1950). Handel's findings are developed further in Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence: Studies in the Sociology of Film* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1974), [chapter 4](#).
- 3 Typical of the 'images of women' approach are Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974); Marjorie Rosen, *Popcorn Venus* (New York, Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973); and Brandon French, *On The Verge Of Revolt: Women in American Films of the Fifties* (New York, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978).
- 4 Typical of the 'woman as image' approach are Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London, Macmillan, 1989); and Constance Penley, ed., *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York, Routledge, and London, BFI Publishing, 1988).
- 5 Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, 214.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 194.
- 7 Laura Mulvey, *Visual*, 22.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 23.
- 9 Robyn Archer and Diana Simmonds, *A Star Is Torn* (London, Virago, 1986).
- 10 Helen Taylor, *Scarlett's Women: 'Gone With the Wind' and its Female Fans* (London, Virago, 1989).
- 11 Jane Gaines, 'War, women and lipstick: fan mags in the forties', in *Heresies*, 18 (1986), 42–7.
- 12 Angela Partington, 'Melodrama's gendered audience', in Sarah Franklin, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, eds, *Off Centre: Feminism and Cultural Studies* (London, Unwin Hyman, forthcoming). See also chapters by Herzog and Gaines, LaPlace and Weiss in this volume.
- 13 Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London, BFI/Macmillan, 1986), chapter 3. See also Andrew Weiss in this collection.
- 14 See Bruce A. Austin, *Immediate Seating: A Look at Movie Audiences* (Belmont, California, Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1989).
- 15 For discussions of historical audiences see Janet Staiger, 'The handmaiden of villainy: methods and problems for studying the historical reception of a film', *Wide Angle*, 8, 1 (1986); Philip Corrigan, 'Film entertainment as ideology and pleasure: towards a history of audiences', in James Curran and Vincent Porter, eds, *British Cinema History* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983); and Sue Harper, 'Popular taste and methodological problems: British historical films in the 1930s', paper given at *Popular European Cinema* conference, University of Warwick, September 1989.
- 16 See Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan, eds, *Mass-Observation at the Movies* (London and New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987).

- 17 See Janet Thumin, 'Super special long-run propositions: revenue, culture and popularity in "Cinematograph Weekly" 's annual review', paper at *Popular European Cinema* conference, University of Warwick, September 1989.
- 18 Vincent Keene, 'Charm not curves', *Picturegoer*, 14 October 1950. Letters responding directly to this article appeared in *Picturegoer*, 9 December 1950.
- 19 I am grateful to Jane Gaines for pointing out to me that the authenticity of the letters published on film magazine letters' pages remains in question. However the Mass-Observation Archive at Sussex University holds all the original letters written to *Picturegoer* in the year 1940, which would provide a more reliable source for the historical analysis of cinema-goers.
- 20 See Popular Memory Group, 'On popular memory', in Bill Schwarz *et al.*, eds, *Making Histories: Studies in History, Writing and Theory* (London, Hutchinson, 1982).
- 21 S.Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1921, chapter 7, quoted in Anne Friedberg, 'Identification and the Star: a refusal of difference', in Christine Gledhill, ed., *Star Signs* (London, BFI Publishing, 1982).
- 22 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 23 Christian Metz, 'Le Signifiant imaginaire', *Communications*, 23 (1975); tr. Celia Britton, Anwyl Williams, Ben Brewster, Alfred Guzzetti, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London, Macmillan, 1983).
- 24 Anne Friedberg, 'Identification and the Star', p. 50.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 53.
- 26 Valerie Walkerdine, 'Video replay: families, films and fantasies', in Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan, eds, *Formations of Fantasy* (London, Methuen, 1986).
- 27 For example, see Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London, Verso, 1986), Mary Anne Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1987), and Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (London, Macmillan, 1984).
- 28 For a typology of audience-star relations, see Andrew Tudor, *Image and Influence*, 80.
- 29 See Tania Modleski, 'Introduction: Hitchcock, feminism and the patriarchal unconscious', in *The Woman Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory* (London, Methuen, 1988).
- 30 This problem is addressed by Annette Kuhn, 'Women's genres', in *Screen*, 25, 1 (1984), 18–28.
- 31 For a discussion of the representation of desire between women produced by their differences, see Jackie Stacey, 'Desperately seeking difference', in *Screen*, 28, 1 (1987), 48–61.
- 32 For a discussion of the pleasurable feelings escapism offers to the cinema audience, see Richard Dyer, 'Entertainment and utopia', *Movie*, 24 (Spring 1977), 2–13.
- 33 See Laura Mulvey, *Visual*, and E. Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (London, Methuen, 1983).
- 34 See Partington, 'Melodrama's gendered audience'.
- 35 Friedberg, 'Identification and the Star', 53.