

INTRODUCTION: LOOKING AT THE STARS

To speak of stardom in Hollywood as a system is to draw attention to how the American film business has employed, and continues to employ, regular strategies for exploiting star performers in the production and consumption of films. Using the word 'system' immediately invokes ideas of stardom as involving an organised interrelationship of elements or features. To study the star system is to look for the standard mechanisms used by the film industry to construct and promote the images of leading performers.

However, the star system is not directed towards producing a uniform category of star: the star system deals in individualism. In Hollywood, stars are represented to moviegoers as distinctively different people and stardom requires moviegoers to be able to differentiate one performer from another. The star system has therefore developed through the emergence of mechanisms for the production of popular identities.

This book examines the place of stars in cinema and takes a historical approach to the star system in Hollywood. As the star system has become an established feature of Hollywood, cinema stars have attracted a great deal of commentary from many quarters. In the press, reviewers and critics discuss the role of stars when evaluating new film releases. Magazine articles will profile stars in their on- and off-screen lives, constructing for their readership an idea of the star's public and private identity. Interviews appear in the press and on radio and television. Published biographies can feature in the non-fiction best-seller lists and cause some controversy

if exposing hitherto secret aspects of a star's life. All these types of output raise stars to public awareness as part of the ongoing matters of contemporary popular culture.

Outside of popular attention to stars, there has developed a whole body of academic work attempting to understand the social and cultural significance of film stardom. This work has combined many perspectives that has seen stars from the perspectives of economics, sociology and psychology (for overviews of this work see Dyer 1998; McDonald 1995 and 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s, the academic field of film studies in Britain and North America has tended to see stars in the semiotic framework of reading stars as signs or images. This work has developed from Richard Dyer's highly influential book *Stars*, first published in 1979 (revised edition 1998). Reading stars as images involves close analysis of the signs presented by stars on-screen in their performances but also the other texts that relate to the star through publicity and promotions. As this work has developed, it has been the main concern to see how those images can be seen to relate to the social and historical conditions in which they emerge.

At the start of Dyer's book, a distinction is made between stars as a 'phenomenon of production' (a part of the economic control of the film industry) and as a 'phenomenon of consumption' (the meanings represented by stars to audiences). It is characteristic of the book and of the research it has subsequently influenced that the issues arising from the latter are prioritised over the former; when looking at film stars, recent academic study has tended to concentrate on the images of stars without thinking of the industry producing those images. Dyer's work was motivated by the need to explain the popular significance of stars, a work of such complexity that it has deserved considerable attention. The problem with only following this line of study, however, is that it loses sight of where stars come from. As a system, Hollywood stardom is the effect of image and industry.

This book is an attempt to partly redress the imbalance. Here the star system will be explored as a component of the Hollywood film business. Any study of the star system must combine an understanding of both industry and image. While not ignoring the images of stars, this book does not set out to provide the type of detailed analyses of star images found

in recent academic studies. Instead, the emphasis is more on the place of stars in the organisation of the industry and how that industry has set conditions for the production and use of star images. This does not mean displacing the dominance of the semiotic by the economic in the study of stars. Either option on its own is inevitably reductive. Rather it is the concern of this study to explore the conditions that have existed in Hollywood for the making of stars and the images that the system has produced. This is a book, therefore, about Hollywood and the production of popular star identities: it is concerned both with the business of Hollywood stardom and the production of commercial identities.

Chapter one establishes a basic framework for thinking about the place of stars in the film business as a combination of image, labour and capital. The chapters that follow pick out key phases in the development of the star system in American cinema. Chapter two deals with the place of stars in nineteenth-century American theatre and the factors that led to the emergence of the film star. This is then followed by a discussion of the place of stars in the studio system of the 1930s and 1940s. Finally, the book looks at the transformation of the star system after the studio era and the place of stars in contemporary Hollywood. While each of these chapters describes the general conditions in which the star system operated in these phases, case studies are included to explore in more detail instances of how particular stars or organisations became representative of conditions in the system at that time.

It has been necessary to put emphasis on particular aspects of the star system. For example, chapter three looks at marketing methods and the contracting of stars, while in chapter four the importance of agencies is discussed. This is not intended to suggest that these aspects of the system are only relevant to the phases covered by these chapters but rather to draw attention to where these aspects have a crucial importance in understanding the operations of the system in those contexts. This book relies on drawing together much of the existing published work on the star system. There remain, however, many holes that still need to be filled in the understanding of how stars have operated and continue to operate in the American film industry. It is therefore hoped that this study may provide a foundation to further exploration of the star system.