

Unstable Symbols

The Representativeness of Film Stars

Part One

Introduction

- This lecture explores the research on film stars that has been developed out of the notion that stars are embodiments of social types.
- It considers some key examples of this work, revealing how stars have been made sense of in terms of cultural significance.
- It also highlights the extent to which some aspects of a star's image and films have been privileged over others in order to make him or her seem more representative of social groups or historical contexts.
- I shall question the notion of stars as representative of social types and historical moments, arguing that film stars have often been lumbered with a heavy burden of representation that few, if any, can support.

Embodying, incarnating & personifying

- Stars are ‘embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, and indeed through which we make our lives – categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on’ (Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 1987: 18).



Structured polysemy

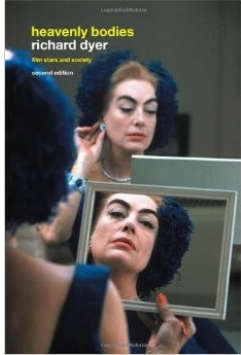
- Designates the ways that stars simultaneously embody different and often contradictory ideologies, reinforcing dominant and alternative values, as well as ambivalent attitudes towards gender, sexuality, class, race and ethnicity.
- Structured polysemy acknowledges the crucial role played by audiences in making stars meaningful
- Different kinds of audience are able to read and take pleasure in particular stars in alternative ways (so the same star can appeal to very different kinds of movie-goer for very different reasons).
- See his case study on Judy Garland and gay men in *Heavenly Bodies*

Identity & Identification

- Star identities/Images are formed out of:
 - Publicity and promotion
 - Public appearances at film festivals and premieres
 - Journalism (mainstream and specialist press)
 - Websites, online forums and chat-rooms.
 - Star interviews, autobiographies and biographies
 - Rumour/gossip and gossip columns.

Articulating human-ness

- ‘Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the ‘individual’. They do so complexly – they are not straightforward affirmations of individualism. On the contrary, they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it’ (Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies* 1987: 8).



The hype and the hard sell

- ‘the fact that we know that hype and the hard sell do characterise the media, that they are supreme instances of manipulation, insincerity, inauthenticity, mass public life, means that the whole star phenomenon is profoundly unstable’ (Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 1987: 16).
- ‘we may read stars in a camp way, enjoying them not for any supposed inner essence revealed but for the way they jump through the hoops of social convention’ (ibid.).

Camp readings

- ‘The undulating contours of Mae West, the lumbering gait and drawling voice of John Wayne, the thin, spiky smile of Joan Fontaine – each can be taken as an emblem of social mores: the ploys of female seduction, the certainty of male American power, the brittle niceness of upper class manners. Seeing them that way is seeing them as appearance, as image, in no way asking for them to be what they are, really’ (Dyer, 1987: 16).

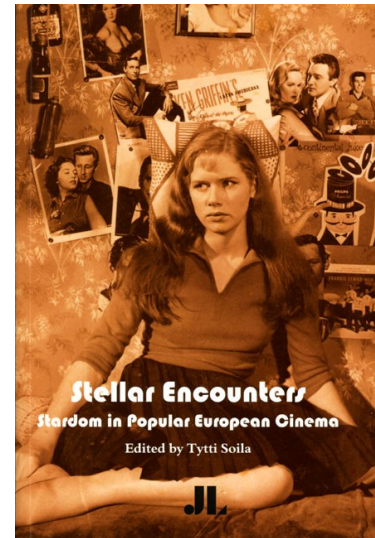


Their greatest significance

- Stars ‘represent typical ways of behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed’ (Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, 1987: 17).
- Stars are ‘embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, and indeed through which we make our lives – categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on’ (ibid., 18).

Making Stars Mean Something

- ‘In many European countries ... the typical feature of a national cinema is the emergence of stars whose qualities were informed by what has been perceived as national characteristics. The stars either confirm them – embodying a number of alleged national qualities in a positive [or] negative way – or deviate from them by embodying the “other” of a presumed national stereotype’ (Tytti Soila, *Stellar Encounters*, 2009: 9).



Jean Gabin



- Jean Gabin epitomized the French working-class in such films as *La Bandera* (Julien Duvivier, 1935), *La Belle équipe/They Were Five* (Duvivier, 1936), *Pépe le Moko* (Duvivier, 1937), *La Bête humaine* (Jean Renoir, 1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (Marcel Carné, 1939).
- He was ‘at once an ordinary bloke-next-door and a tragic hero whose path was at once crossed with crime and death’ [e.g., an ‘homme fatal’] (Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*, 2000: 62).

The Myth of Jean Gabin



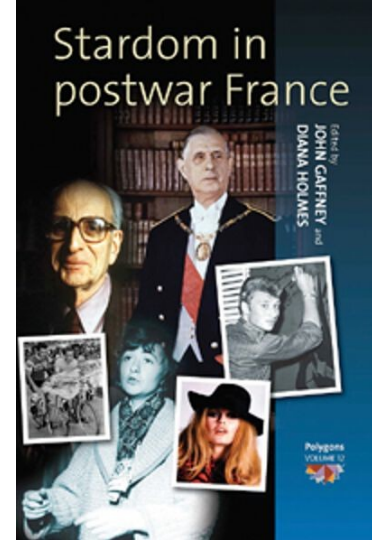
- Gabin's image (or 'myth') came together in the mid-1930s 'in the figure of the tragic working-class hero, whose criminal nature was socially motivated, and thus did not detract from an overwhelmingly positive image – so much so that Gabin has ever since been regarded as the emblematic hero of the Popular Front years' (Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*, 2000: 65).
- His incarnation of working class values was largely associated with his face (e.g., rugged features, sharp lines, strong nose and thin lips) and his authentic performance style (i.e., a mixture of poise and understatement) (ibid, 70).
- 'Gabin's working-class persona was completed, in the 1930s, by his appearance – the cloth cap and the soft jackets he wore' (ibid., 71).

Social symbols or symbolic negations?

- ‘...the “stars” of a given historical period or moment capture their era for us in a range of ways: ... the preoccupations, values, conflicts and contradictions of a particular culture, its “climate of feeling”, are vividly expressed through its celebrities (John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, *Stardom in Postwar France*, 2007: 1).
- Stardom: ‘a symbolic portal into the nature of a culture’ (ibid.)
- Stars as ‘that culture’s ultimate expression’ (ibid.).
- Yet stars are also atypical, being ‘symbolic negations of a given culture,’ offering something new, something more exciting and aspirational, more glamorous than the reality of life in the culture to which they belong (ibid.)

Zeitgeist

- ‘Stars can restate, often in new and modern forms, old identities and values, as well as calling a society towards newer, and perhaps confused, emergent values and value systems’ (John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, *Stardom in Postwar France*, 2007: 1).
- Diana Holmes, ‘“A Girl of Today”: Brigitte Bardot,’ Gaffney and Holmes (eds.), *Stardom in Postwar France*, 2007: 40-66.



Brigitte Bardot



- BB incarnated the values of a young generation in the mid to late fifties but she did so in complex and contradictory ways.
- Holmes notes ‘a tension between, on the one hand, a prescriptive definition of modern femininity as domesticity and maternity in a more stylish guise and, on the other hand, a sense that femininity might also be compatible with citizenship, education, opportunity, mobility – and a self-defined, pleasurable sexuality’ (Diana Holmes, “‘A Girl of Today’: Brigitte Bardot,’ 2007: 46).

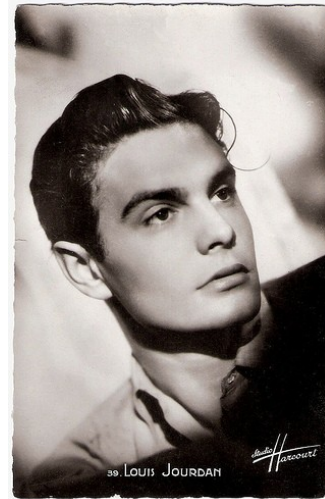
BB: Girl of today to woman of yesterday

- ‘Bardot’s appeal as a star seems to have depended, at least in part, on her capacity to hold together a tension between contradictory discourses on sexuality and femininity: between, on the one hand, a nascent female desire for sexual freedom ... and on the other hand, a powerful ideology ... that defined women as by nature dependent, monogamous and maternal’ (Holmes 2007: 62).
- In the mid-1960s, ‘this conflict began to be more clearly articulated, and signs of the second-wave feminist movement began to appear, Bardot’s popularity declined’ (ibid.).



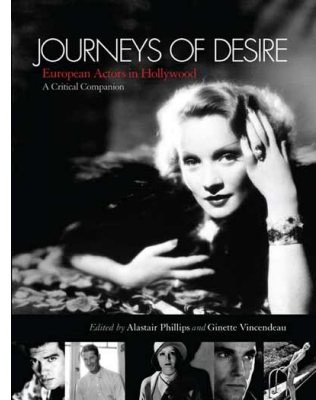
The 'burden' of national identity

- Representing Frenchness in Hollywood: Maurice Chevalier (1930s), Charles Boyer (1940s) and Louis Jourdan (1950s).
- Louis Jourdan (originally Louis Gendre) began his Hollywood career in 1947, appearing in *The Paradine Case* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1947), *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (Max Ophüls, 1948), *Madame Bovary* (Vincente Minnelli, 1949).
- By 1950 he starred in *Anne of the Indies* (Jacques Tourneur, 1951), *Three Coins in the Fountain* (Jean Negulesco, 1954) and *Gigi* (Minnelli, 1958).



Louis Jordan's 'foreign-ness'

- Hilary Radner, 'Louis Jordan – the “Hyper-sexual” Frenchman,' *Journeys of Desire* (eds) Phillips & Vincendeau, 2006: 124-32
- Radner argues that Jourdan was frequently used in Hollywood to represent an unspecified 'Un-American' identity.
- His ethnicity shifted between a range of 'foreign' identities, including an 'Oriental' villain in the James Bond film *Octopussy* (John Glen, 1983) (Radner 2006: 126).
- In Hollywood, Jourdan's persona lacked 'a clearly defined national self' (Radner 2006: 130).
- What it represented was 'otherness,' particularly in terms of sexuality (ibid.).



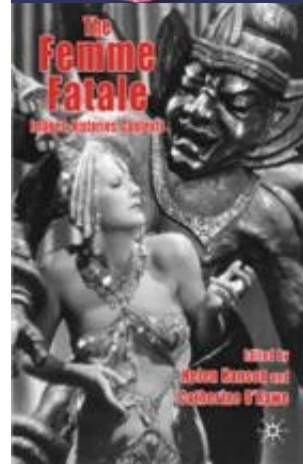
Zhang Ziyi



- Starred in:
 - ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*** (Ang Lee, 2000)
 - ***Hero*** (Zhang Yimou, 2002)
 - ***House of the Flying Daggers*** (Zhang Yimou, 2004)
- By 2004, Zhang Ziyi was widely regarded as an ‘embodiment of the transformation of Chineseness in the age of global modernity’ (Olga Kourelou, “Put the Blame on ... Mei”: Zhang Ziyi and the Politics of Global Stardom’, *The Femme Fatale* [eds] Hanson & O’Rawe, 2010: 123).

Kourelou's essay on Zhang Ziyi

- Reads Zhang Ziyi's star image in terms of its crystallization of ideological conflicts.
- These conflicts result from the transnationalism of Chinese films and stars in the global market.
- (Olga Kourelou, "'Put the Blame on ... Mei': Zhang Ziyi and the Politics of Global Stardom", *The Femme Fatale* [eds] Hanson & O'Rawe, 2010: 123).



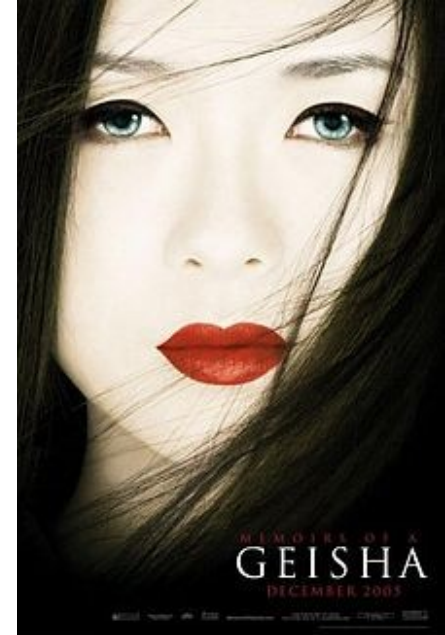
The face of C21st China



- ZZ was one of three prominent Chinese cultural icons on the cover of the American magazine *Newsweek*.
- But she was also denounced as an ‘Orientalist movie icon’ when her eyes were retouched and tinted blue to look more Western for the billboard posters of *Memoirs of a Geisha* (Rob Marshall, 2005)

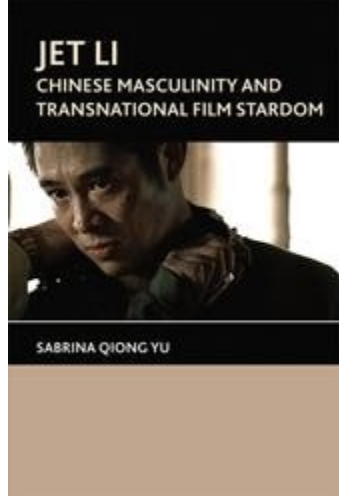
A problematic symbol

- ZZ's performance skills, beauty and charismatic personality have made her one of the twenty-first century's greatest film stars.
- Yet, as an icon, embodiment or incarnation of China or of Chinese femininity (or even of a transnational and modern or westernized Chinese femininity) her image is complex, contradictory, controversial and contestable.
- Traditional and modern.



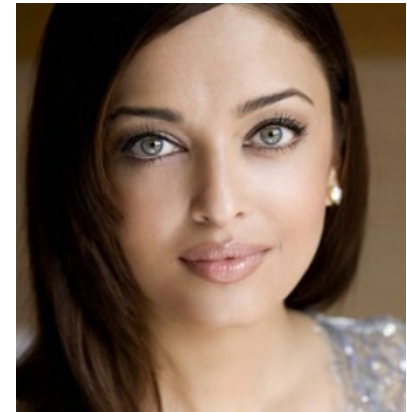
Transnational Stardom

- Distinction between ‘international’ and ‘transnational’ stardom
- An ‘international star’ may achieve global recognition by making films exclusively in their own country.
- A ‘transnational star’ needs to physically transfer from one film industry to another to make films, often in a different language from his or her own’ (Sabrina Qiong Yu, *Jet Li: Chinese Masculinity and Transnational Stardom*, 2012: 2)

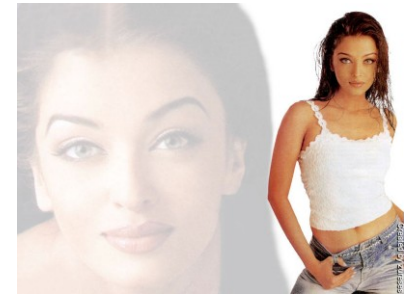


Aishwarya Rai Bachchan

- Aishwarya Rai Bachchan qualifies for the designation of ‘transnational star’ since she has made a number of English-language films in Europe and the USA.
- Rai’s Transnational films:
 - *Bride & Prejudice* (Gurinder Chadha, 2004)
 - *The Mistress of Spices* (Paul Mayeda Berges, 2005)
 - *Provoked: A True Story* (Jag Mundhra, 2006)
 - *The Last Legion* (Doug Lefler, 2007)
 - *The Pink Panther 2* (Harald Zwatt, 2009)



Aish Rai Bollywood star



- Film debut: *Iruvar/The Duo* (Mani Ratnam, 1997)
- First Hindi film: ...*Aur Pyaar Ho Gaya/Come Let Us Fall in Love* (Rahul Rawail, 1997)
- Break-through: Tamil comedy *Jeans* (S. Shankar, 1998), set in Los Angeles and Madras.
- Won her first Filmfare award for Best Actress for the Hindi musical romance *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam/Straight from the Heart* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 1999).
- *Devdas* (Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2002) transformed Rai into Bollywood's top female, eclipsing her co-star Madhuri Dixit (the queen of Indian popular cinema from the mid-1990s).

ARB: Bollywood's No.1 box-office female

- ***Kuch Naa Kaho/Love Can't Be Arranged*** (Rohan Sippy, 2003), co-starring with Abhishek Bachchan.
- ***Raincoat*** (Rituparno Ghosh, 2004).
- 2004-05, she was used by L'Oréal in India to promote its skin whitening cream **White Perfect**.
- 2004: Aish Rai starred in ***Bride & Prejudice***, a Bollywood update of Jane Austen's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice* made in UK, USA and India. Earned \$6.6 million in the USA.
- Written and directed by Gurinder Chadha (Britain's leading Asian film director) and her Japanese-American husband Paul Mayeda Berges, who had achieved spectacular success with their comedy ***Bend It Like Beckham*** (2002).



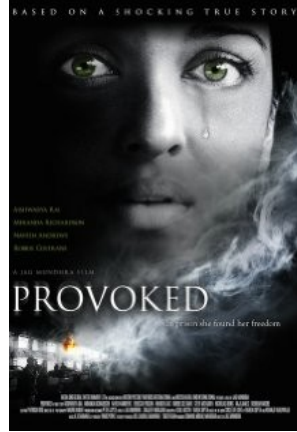
The Mistress of Spices (2005)

- Based on a magic realist novel by Chitra Banerjee (1997).
- Rai plays Tilo, an Indian woman who runs a spice shop in Oakland, San Francisco
- She falls in love with Doug (Dylan McDermott), an architect with Native American ancestry.
- The film is dreamy and slow, and has much in common with *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström, 2000)
- It received mixed reviews and did little business at the box-office.
- It gave Rai the chance to perform in a very different register than her Bollywood movies
- It also highlighted her voice, which is heard throughout providing a voice-over narration on the soundtrack.



Provoked: A True Story (2006)

- Based on Kiranjit Ahluwalia's autobiography *Circle of Light* (1997).
- Strong ensemble cast: Naveen Andrews (as the abusive husband) and Miranda Richardson (as cellmate Ronny).
- Rai hardly speaks and when she does it is in broken English.
- Playing a repressed and traumatised character who's first language is Punjabi, Rai mainly uses her eyes to convey her character's thoughts and feelings, her reactions to the situations in which she finds herself.
- She produces a powerful yet subtle and subdued performance.



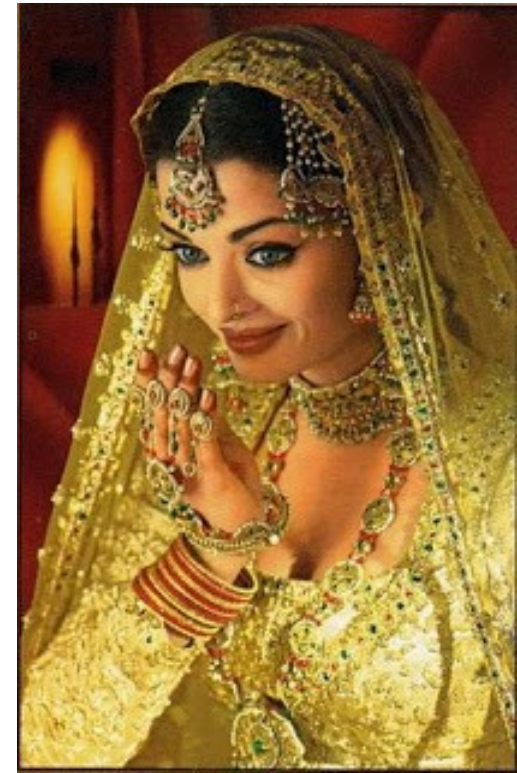
The Last Legion (2007)

- An historical fantasy action adventure
- Based on a screenplay by Jez Butterworth
- Produced by the Dino De Laurentiis Company (USA), Quinta Communications (France) and Ingenious Film Partners (UK).
- Starred Ben Kingsley and Colin Firth
- Aishwarya Rai plays the warrior Mira, a woman from So Kerala recruited into the militia of the Eastern Roman Empire, who joins forces with Aurelius (Colin Firth), eventually falling in love with him.
- Her role required skills in martial arts and stunt-work more than nuanced acting.



Back in Bollywood

- In April 2007, Aishwarya Rai married Abhishek Bachchan.
- She subsequently appeared as 'Aishwarya Rai Bachchan' (i.e. traditional woman).
- Co-starred with her husband in:
 - *Umrao Jaan* (J.P. Dutta, 2006)
 - *Dhoom:2*
 - *Guru* (Mani Ratnam, 2007)
 - *Sarkar Raj* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2008).



The Pink Panther 2 (2009)



- A Steve Martin star vehicle, with a supporting cast that includes British actors Emily Mortimer, Alfred Molina, John Cleese and Jeremy Irons, Japanese actor Yuki Matsuzaki and French action hero Jean Reno, plus Aishwarya Rai Bachchan.
- Made in Hollywood by MGM and Columbia Studios (owned by Sony) and shot on location in Massachusetts, Paris and Rome.
- Aishwarya Rai Bachchan plays Sonia Solandress, a criminal expert and researcher who forms part of an investigative international 'dream team.'
- Rai Bachchan personifies India, a modern, cosmopolitan and stylish India (i.e., she is never seen dressed in a sari or salwar kameez).





Reviews of PP2

- ‘the star quotient has been upped to create a polyglot cast whose members don’t gel but which will ensure the film maximum publicity across a wide range of territories’ (Sukhdev Sandhu, the *Daily Telegraph*, 13/02/2009, p. 25).



Star of India

- 'Keira Knightley meets Catherine Zeta-Jones with added Kate Winslet' (Martyn Palmer, 'The Star of India,' *Times* magazine, 31.03.2007, p. 39).
- 'Representing India and being seen as the face of an increasingly confident, outward-looking country - is important to her' (ibid., p. 42).



After the Break

- I'm going to continue to look at the social representativeness of film stars by focusing on two specific groups of stars, 1950s' sex symbols and 1980s' body-builder action stars.
- I shall consider the extent to which they have been written about as representative of social types and values, as well as being judged to be symptomatic of particular sets of social conditions and cultural contradictions.
- Any questions?

