

6 Stars as Specific Images

Stars embody social types, but star images are always more complex and specific than types. Types are, as it were, the ground on which a particular star's image is constructed. This image is found across a range of media texts. I want in this chapter to discuss the nature of the different categories into which these texts fall, and then to consider, generally and through an extended example, Jane Fonda, how these texts construct a specific star image.

A star image is made out of media texts that can be grouped together as *promotion*, *publicity*, *films* and *criticism* and *commentaries*.

Promotion

This refers to texts which were produced as part of the deliberate creation/manufacture of a particular image or image-context for a particular star. It includes (i) material concerned directly with the star in question - studio announcements, press hand-outs (including potted biographies), fan club publications (which were largely controlled by the studios), pin-ups, fashion pictures, ads in which stars endorse a given merchandise, public appearances (e.g. at premieres, as recorded on film or in the press); and (ii) material promoting the star in a particular film - hoardings, magazine ads, trailers, etc. Thomas B. Harris has described this in some detail in 'The Building of Popular Images'.

Promotion is probably the most straightforward of all the texts which construct a star image, in that it is the most deliberate, direct, intentioned and self-conscious (which is not to say that it is by any means entirely any of those things).

Promotion can get things wrong. Early promotion may not push the aspects of the performer which were subsequently to make them a star (e.g. both Davis and Monroe were promoted as routine pin-up starlets to begin with). However, this is more the exception than the rule, and either way promotion can be taken as an indicator of the studio's (or its promotion department's), agent's or star's conception of a given star image.

On occasion, promotion of a film may be deliberately untrue to the film itself, in the interests of promoting the star's image (e.g. Marlon Brando's attempts to escape the 'Stanley Kowalski' image of *A Streetcar Named Desire* by playing Napoleon in *Desiree* and Mark Antony in *Julius Caesar* did not deter the promoters of those films from billing his roles in Kowalski-esque terms - see the discussion by Hollis Alpert in his *The Dreams and the Dreamers*, 'Marlon Brando and the Ghost of Stanley Kowalski').

Publicity

This is theoretically distinct from promotion in that it is not, or does not appear to be, *deliberate* image-making. It is 'what the press finds out', 'what the star lets slip in an interview', and is found in the press and magazines (not only the strictly film ones), radio and television interviews, and the gossip columns. In practice, much of this too was controlled by the studios or the star's agent, but it did not appear to be, and in certain cases (e.g. Ingrid Bergman's 'illegitimate' child by Roberto Rossellini) it clearly was not. The only cases where one can be fairly certain of genuine publicity are the scandals: Fatty Arbuckle's rape case, Ingrid Bergman's child, the murder of Lana Turner's gigolo boyfriend, Robert Mitchum's dope charge, Judy Garland's drunken breakdowns, Elizabeth Taylor's 'breaking up' of Debbie Reynolds's marriage with Eddie Fisher. Scandals can harm a career (Arbuckle permanently, Bergman temporarily) or alternatively give it a new lease of life (Turner, Mitchum, Taylor). An unnamed publicity man is quoted by Hollis Alpert to suggest a link between scandal and success and glamour:

The stars are losing their glamour. It's next to impossible to get Burt Lancaster into columns these days. He's too serious. The public prefers its stars to behave a little crazy. Look what that dope party did for Bob Mitchum! Look how Deborah Kerr's divorce troubles sent her price way up! Who wants to form a fan club for a businessman? (*The Dreams and the Dreamers*, p. 39)

The importance of publicity is that, in its apparent or actual escape from the image that Hollywood is trying to promote, it seems more 'authentic'. It is thus often taken to give a privileged access to the real person of the star. It is also the place where one can read tensions between the star-as-person and her/his image, tensions which at another level become themselves crucial to the image (e.g. Marilyn Monroe's attempts to be considered something other than a dumb blonde sex object, Robert Redford's 'loner' shunning of the attention his star status attracts).

Films

Inevitably, the films have a distinct and privileged place in a star's image. It is after all *film* stars that we are considering - their celebrity is defined by the fact of their appearing in films. However, the star is also a phenomenon of cinema (which as a business could make money from stars in additional ways to having them make films, e.g. in advertising, the fan industry, personal appearances) and of general social meanings, and there are instances of stars whose films may actually be less important than other aspects of their career. Brigitte Bardot is a case in point, and Zsa Zsa Gabor is a film star whose films only a dedicated buff could name. The deaths of Montgomery Clift, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland (and the premature retirement of Greta Garbo) may be as significant as the films they made, while Lana Turner's later films were largely a mere illustration of her life. It may be as pin-ups that Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth are really important, and as recording stars that Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby really matter. While in general films are the most important of the texts, one should bear these points

in mind when, as here, the focus is the star's total image rather than, as in Part Three, the role of that image in the films.

Particularly important is the notion of the *vehicle*. Films were often built around star images. Stories might be written expressly to feature a given star, or books might be bought for production with a star in mind. Sometimes alterations to the story might be effected in order to preserve the star's image. This is what is implied by the term 'star vehicle' (a term actually used by Hollywood itself).

The vehicle might provide a character of the type associated with the star (e.g. Monroe's 'dumb blonde' roles, Garbo's melancholic romantic roles); a situation, setting or generic context associated with the star (e.g. Garbo in relationships with married men, Wayne in Westerns; as Colin McArthur has noted of stars of gangster films, they 'seem to gather within themselves the qualities of the genre ... so that the violence, suffering and *Angst* of the films is restated in their faces, physical presence, movement and speech' (*Underworld USA*, p. 24)); or opportunities for the star to do her/his thing (most obviously in the case of musical stars - e.g. a wistful solo number for Judy Garland, an extended ballet sequence for Gene Kelly - but also, for instance, opportunities to display Monroe's body and wiggle walk, scenes of action in Wayne's films). Vehicles are important as much for what conventions they set up as for how they develop them, for their ingredients as for their realisation. In certain respects, a set of star vehicles is rather like a film genre such as the Western, the musical or the gangster film. As with genres proper, one can discern across a star's vehicles continuities of iconography (e.g. how they are dressed, made-up and coiffed, performance mannerisms, the settings with which they are associated), visual style (e.g. how they are lit, photographed, placed within the frame) and structure (e.g. their role in the plot, their function in the film's symbolic pattern). (For further discussion of performance and structure, see chapter 8). Of course, not all films made by a star are vehicles, but looking at their films in terms of vehicles draws attention to those films that do not 'fit', that constitute inflections, exceptions to, subversions of the vehicle pattern and the star image. (For further consideration of genre in film, see Edward Buscombe, 'The Idea of Genre in the American Cinema'; the section on 'Genre Criticism' in Bill Nichols, *Movies and Methods*; and Steve Neale, *Genre*.)

One needs also to consider the star's *filmic presentation*, the specific ways in which the star appears, performs and is used in individual films. This is dealt with in Part Three.

Criticism and commentaries

This refers to what was said or written about the star in terms of appreciation or interpretation by critics and writers. It covers contemporary and subsequent writings (including obituaries and other material written after a star's death or retirement), and is found in film reviews, books on films and indeed in almost any kind of writing dealing, fictitiously or otherwise, with the contemporary scene. To this can be added film, radio and television profiles of stars. These always appear after the initial promotion and film-making of a star, although they may act back on subsequent promotion and film activity (e.g. the response of

critics to Davis in *Of Human Bondage* legitimated her demand for 'strong' roles; the intellectuals' 'discovery' of Monroe is discernible in the increasingly self-reflexive nature of her last films). We need to distinguish between criticism and commentaries that did that, and those that have been elaborated after the star's active involvement in film-making. The latter may suggest an interpretation of the star at odds with the star's contemporary image (e.g. today's cult of Humphrey Bogart and Monroe - do we see more worldly wisdom in him, more tragic consciousness in her?).

Criticism and commentaries are oddly situated in the star's image. They are media products, part of the cinematic machine, yet it is commonly held that they are to be placed on the side of the audience - the consumers of media texts - rather than that of the industry - the producers of media texts. Critics and commentators are often taken to express rather than to construct the response to a star, and indeed on occasion they may well be expressing a widely held, pre-existing sentiment or view about a star. More frequently, however, they contribute to the shaping of 'public opinion' about a star (and the relationship of what the media call 'public opinion' to the opinion of the public must always remain problematic). Despite this, critics and commentators do not operate in the same space as those who construct the image in promotion and films. This gap between on the one hand promotional and filmic construction of the star image (which is further complicated by the highly ambivalent way publicity relates to promotion and films) and on the other the role of criticism and commentaries in that construction is a real one, and accounts for both the complexity, contradictoriness and 'polysemy' of the star image and also for the capacity of critical opinion to contribute to shifts in careers such as those of Davis and Monroe noted above.

A specific image: Jane Fonda

I want in a moment to look at the way these various media texts come together to form a particular star image, but before doing this we need to ask what exactly the nature of this coming together is.

It is misleading to think of the texts combining cumulatively into a sum total that constitutes the image, or alternatively simply as being moments in a star's image's career (this phrase is used throughout to emphasise the fact that we are talking about a film star as a media text not as a real person) that appear one after the other - although those emphases are important. The image is a *complex totality* and it does have a *chronological dimension*. What we need to understand that totality in its temporality is the concept of a *structured polysemy*.

By 'polysemy' is meant the multiple but finite meanings and effects that a star image signifies. In looking at Jane Fonda's image, I shall not be trying to say what she meant for the 'average person' at various points in her career, but rather to look at her image in terms of the multiplicity of its meanings. This does not mean that these are endless. The possibilities of meaning are limited in part by what the text makes available.

This polysemy is *structured*. In some cases, the various elements of signification may *reinforce* one another. John Wayne's image draws together his bigness, his

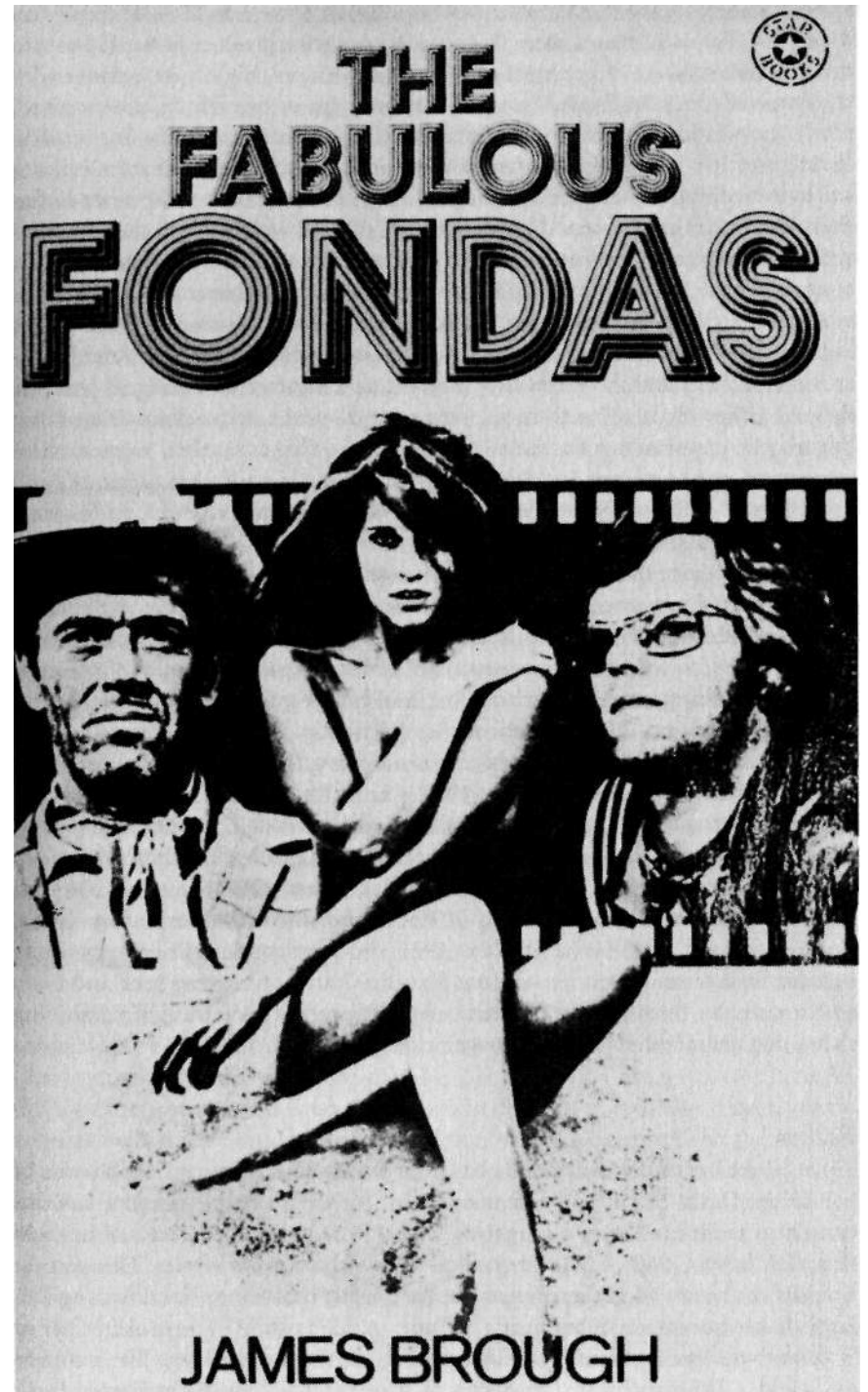


3 & 4 (left) Marlene Dietrich in the 1930s and (right) the 1950s.

association with the West, his support for right-wing politics, his male independence of, yet courtliness towards, women - the elements are mutually reinforcing, legitimating a certain way of being a man in American society. In other cases, the elements may be to some degree in *opposition* or *contradiction*, in which case the star's image is characterised by attempts to negotiate, reconcile or mask the difference between the elements, or else simply hold them in tension. At an extreme - for example the later part of Marilyn Monroe's career - the contradictions threaten to fragment the image altogether.

Images also have a *temporal dimension*. Structured polysemy does not imply stasis; images develop or change over time. In the case of Fonda, the direction is for the most part in terms of change, but it may also in other cases be seen in terms of continuity. Marlene Dietrich is an example of the latter. The image crystallised in her films with Josef von Sternberg (1930-5) has remained the key note of her career - for a sketch of what he calls a 'combination of opposites', see David Shipman, *The Great Stars - the Golden Years*, p. 156. Attempts to break with the image by putting her in Westerns (*Destry Rides Again*, 1939; *Rancho Notorious*, 1952) and other more American' vehicles only succeeded in reinforcing her image as the alluring, exotic female 'other'. Her ageing, far from dimming this, contributed to it, partly by the degree to which her beauty remained, partly by her presentation, in films, concerts, records and photographs, in these terms: the 'Eternal Feminine' whose long career is further promise of eternity. Glamour photographs from early and late in her career illustrate this continuity, in particular the way in which she emerges out of a vague background that places her nowhere earthly but rather in some 'other' realm of existence and the emphasis on her almost Oriental eyes that look straight into the camera.

The illustration on the cover of the paperback edition (1975) of James Brough's *The Fabulous Fondas* provides a useful way into most of the tensions in Jane



5 The Fabulous Fondas, cover of paperback edition, 1975.