

VOLUME 11 NUMBER 2: STARDOM

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA'S FILM JOURNAL

CINEPHILE



• Emily Carman • Swapnil Rai • Linda C. Riedmann • Kathy Fuller-Seeley • Zeke Saber • Kate Saccone

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Kate Saccone received her M.A. in Film Studies from Columbia University in 2013. Her thesis, from which this article emerges, was titled *"The Jig's Not Up: The Hollywood Song-and-Dance Man Reconsidered"* and focused on the male stars of the classical musical genre. In addition to her work on the musical and the relationship between dance and film, Kate is the Project Manager of the Women Film Pioneers Project, which is a digital resource from Columbia that advances research on the hundreds of women who worked behind-the-scenes as more than actresses in the silent film industry.

Editor's Notes

Lauren Bacall, the late actress and star, once claimed, "Stardom isn't a profession, it's an accident." This statement is applicable to her particular story as it was never the intention of Betty Joan Perske from the Bronx to become Miss Bacall of the silver screen. However, her placement in the constellation of actors who have achieved stardom was far from accidental. This issue of *Cinephile* seeks to extract stars from deeply imbued ideology of a billion-dollar, worldwide industry and pinpoint the various ways in which the constructs of stardom shape our perception of culture and vice versa. The topics explored in *Cinephile* 11.2 address both historically significant and contemporary figures; star systems in America and internationally; and the impact of technology in reconfiguring star images.

To begin our issue, Kathy Fuller-Seeley details the influence of the African-American transmedia star of the 1940s, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson. Fuller-Seeley shows how his seamless transition from radio to film and appeal to audiences challenged the shameful race relations of America's divisive past. Next, Emily Carman's essay on Robert Aldrich's film *The Big Knife* (1955) reveals the anachronistic inconsistencies in on-screen depictions of stardom alongside the deteriorating contract system of the 1950s. By using close textual analysis and archival documents, Carman displays the validity of an historiographic methodology when approaching the topic of stardom in the Hollywood postwar era. Zeke Saber's article on Nicolas Cage shifts the flow of the journal into a contemporary case study of a star with an enigmatic reputation. In his essay, Saber plots the course of Cage's career along with his performance style to make sense of his present persona and the infamous viral video "Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit." Another case study of contemporary actress Julianne Moore by Linda C. Riedmann unearths her inspirational and subversive characteristics. Riedmann pulls from filmic examples as well as biographic

information to demonstrate Moore's resistance to celebrity status. In an essay that concentrates on "The Hollywood Song-And-Dance-Man" of Classical Hollywood musicals, Kate Saccone bridges the gap between historic icons like Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire and their contemporary interpretations (or reinterpretations). With particular focus on body, performance, and the revitalization of their performances on YouTube, Saccone makes room for scholarly discussion on stars of bygone eras and their relation to new forms of media consumption. And, to end our issue, Swapnil Rai provides a thorough historical account of the Bollywood industry and the value of stardom and celebrity status in the post-globalization era.

To the contributors of this edition, I add each of you to my list of those I consider not only stars but superstars in regards to your cooperation, patience, and talent. Without your names gracing the front cover, I am certain this issue would be box-office poison. Your work paired with the creative efforts of Julia Carnevali, with her intricately designed silhouette of Lauren Bacall featured on the front cover, and Amy Presley, for her stardom inspired photoshoot to accompany each essay, make the quality of this issue a complete vision. Additionally, I offer a warm hug to my uncle, Rushe Hudson, for his tireless efforts on the design of this issue; without him, the font would probably be Comic Sans. Of course, I must also extend my enduring gratitude to the members of our editorial board and our fearless academic advisor, Christine Evans. And finally, to Cameron Cronin, Karen Tong, Ernest Mathijs, Lisa Coulthard, Brian McIlroy, Liz Clarke, Jill Gibson, Kimberley Monteyne, Carl & Lisa Hulsey, and McKay Moran, your assistance and support throughout this process holds immeasurable value.

Hilary Hulsey

“Hollywood Goes to Harlem”

**Eddie Anderson,
the African-American
Film Star
Created by Radio**

Kathy Fuller-Seeley

*Just four months after
the Atlanta, Georgia
premiere of the film
Gone with the Wind,
which Academy Award-*

*nominated, African-American
actress Hattie McDaniel
was barred from attend-
ing because of her race,
a quite different scenario
played out in New York
City.*

In April 1940, the first elaborate premiere of a Hollywood studio-produced film was held in Harlem, the cultural capital of Black America. Paramount Studios sponsored two simultaneous world premieres of Buck Benny Rides Again, a movie which, in every way but actual billing, co-starred American network radio's premiere comedy star, Jack Benny, and his radio valet and butler, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. One gala was held at the studio's flagship theatre, the Paramount, in midtown Manhattan. With the California-based Benny and members of his radio cast making rare personal appearances on stage during the film's run, the show broke all previous box office records. In a most unusual move



Eddie Anderson's cross-media and cross-racial stardom was very real in the U.S. popular media between 1940 and 1943.

for an industry which limited roles for African-American performers to tiny, often uncredited parts as servants, Paramount also aggressively promoted the film's surprise, break-out co-star, African-American actor Anderson.

Paramount's publicity department released a barrage of pub-

licity in New York and in major African-American newspapers across the nation, touting "Hollywood goes to Harlem!" as the studio sponsored a separate premiere of Buck Benny Rides Again (Sandrich, 1940) on the night before, on April 23, 1940, at the Loew's Victoria Theater, a 2,400 seat picture palace lo-

cated on 125th Street in Harlem, adjacent to the Apollo Theater. Eddie "Rochester" Anderson was given the "hail the conquering hero" treatment in Harlem—an estimated 150,000 people lined the streets as Anderson and major political, social and entertainment dignitaries of Black America paraded to the theatre. Jack Benny, his radio cast members, film director Mark Sandrich and Benny's radio comic nemesis Fred Allen, all appeared on stage at the Victoria to praise Anderson, and blow-by-blow coverage of the premiere was carried on a local black-oriented radio station. After the show, Anderson was honoured with receptions at the Savoy Ballroom and the Theresa Hotel. The event was extensively covered in breathless detail by the nation's black press.

Anderson's role in the Buck Benny film as Jack's valet "Rochester" carried over from radio, in a witty and "hip" display of inter-media storytelling and crossover fame. Anderson's performance stole the movie, as it gave "Rochester" far more screen time than black actors had found in any previous Hollywood film that had not been a black cast feature. Buck Benny featured Rochester's droll retorts to Jack's (whom Rochester cheekily called 'Boss') egotistical vanities, croaked out in his distinctive, raspy voice. The film and the role positioned Anderson as one of the most prominent African-American performers of the era, despite—and because of—mainstream white racial attitudes of the day. It took star status in a rival medium (as co-star with a white comedian) for a black actor to achieve prominence in American film.

Buck Benny was among the highest grossing movies of the year at the American box office in 1940. Throughout the nation, movie theatres billed the film on marquees as co-starring Benny and "Rochester." In many theatres, especially African-American

theatres in the South, but also in white and black neighbourhood movie houses elsewhere across the nation, the marquee billing put “Rochester’s” name first above the title. The film’s box office success led to recognition of Anderson and Benny as spokesmen for civil rights and integration. The two were named to the Schomburg Center Honor Roll for Race Relations for their public efforts to foster interracial understanding. This moment before World War II further raised the consciousness of a young generation of African-Americans to fight for civil rights, in an interlude before racist white backlash coalesced to further limit black entertainers in American popular media. Anderson’s success caused him to be hailed in black newspapers as being a harbinger of a “new day” in interracial amity and new possibilities for black artistic, social, and economic achievement.

Eddie Anderson’s radio-fuelled movie stardom complicates the shameful Hollywood story of racism, racial attitudes and restrictive limits on representations of African-Americans in film and popular entertainment media in the late 1930s and World War II era. A middle-aged dancer, singer, and comic who’d forged a regional career in West Coast vaudeville and mostly un-credited servant roles in Hollywood films, Anderson rocketed to stardom due to his role on Jack Benny’s Jell-O program, one of the top-rated comedy-variety programs on radio in the 1930s. It took the “inter-media” mixture of the two rival entertainment forms of film and broadcasting, along with the input of a coalition of decision makers (NBC, sponsor Jell-O, show creator and star Benny, Paramount director Mark Sandrich) to create this interstitial space to foster Anderson’s fame.

Anderson’s “Rochester” role in his first years on Jack Benny’s radio program (1937-1938) had contained heavy doses of min-

strel stereotypes—stealing, dice-playing, superstitions—but from the beginning, the denigratory characteristics were counterbalanced by the valet’s quick wit and irreverence for Benny’s authority, accentuated by his inimitable voice and the wonderful timing of his pert retorts and disgruntled, disbelieving “Come now!” This spark of intelligence and individual personality that Benny and his writers gave Anderson to work with, which he so embellished with his performance, made him an immediate sensation on Benny’s show. Eddie Anderson (who

On April 23, 1940, at the Loew’s Victoria Theater, Anderson was given the “hail the conquering hero” treatment in Harlem—an estimated 150,000 people lined the streets as Anderson and major political, social and entertainment dignitaries of Black America paraded to the theatre.

had been appearing in tiny, often uncredited bit parts in Hollywood films and in black nightclubs on the West Coast circuits for twenty years) now quickly became so identified with the “Rochester” character in the radio public’s mind that he adopted it as his stage name.

Rochester critiqued Benny’s every order and decision, with an informality of interracial interaction unusual in radio or film depictions of the day. The radio show writers gave Rochester all the punchlines in his interactions with Benny. His lively bump-tiousness raised his character above other, more stereotypical black servants in American popular media. Rochester could appeal to a wide variety of listeners, as Mel Ely suggests of Amos n Andy. He always remained a loyal ser-

vant and had to follow Benny’s orders, so he was palatable to those listeners most resistant to social change. Yet, in a small way, Rochester spoke truth to power, and he was portrayed by an actual African-American actor, so he gained sympathy and affection among many black listeners.

Paramount had sought to translate Jack Benny’s radio popularity into film success for several years, but it was the creative ideas of young director Mark Sandrich (who had created the Astaire/Rogers musical films in his previous job at RKO) that finally made Jack Benny a film box office star. During the production of his first Benny-featured movie, *Man About Town* (1939) Sandrich cast Benny’s supporting radio players in small supporting roles. Warming to their huge popularity on-air and their jovial informality on the set, Sandrich began to incorporate the radio performers further into the on-screen action. The director was especially impressed by the lively “eccentric” dancing, comic acting ability, and unique voice of Anderson, and he increasingly expanded Anderson’s small role to showcase the strong comic chemistry between Jack and Rochester. By the time filming was completed, Benny and Anderson had found themselves co-starred in an interracial buddy movie. *Man About Town*’s June 1939 premiere in Benny’s hometown, Waukegan, Illinois, drew 100,000 spectators to see the radio/film stars in person, watch the parades and experience being in the audiences of radio broadcasts. Their applause for Anderson was louder than for any performer beside Benny. Film reviewers across the nation unanimously praised Anderson for “stealing the film” from the top comic in radio. While high-brow cinema critics, like the *New York Times*’s Bosley Crowther, disdainfully commented that these popular radio-inflected movies were un-cinematic, no more than filmed radio broadcasts, the radio fans

among the movie-going public delighted in watching the popular characters interact on screen.

The enormous box office success of Eddie Anderson’s co-starred films with Jack Benny (three of them in little over a year, , the third being *Love Thy Neighbor* (Sandrich, 1940), also featuring Fred Allen) fuelled reports in the black press that prejudiced racial attitudes could be softening in the white South. Rochester was hopefully opening a wedge to destroy the old myth that racist Southern whites refused to watch black performers, the myth to which Hollywood film and radio producers so stubbornly clung. The Pittsburgh Courier lauded Anderson as a “goodwill ambassador” bringing a message of respectability and equality to whites in Hollywood and across the nation (331).

In 1940, Eddie Anderson was perfectly positioned, through an unusual American stardom that merged radio and film, to represent that optimistic hope that the hurtful past representations of blacks in the mass media could finally be put aside. An editorial in The Los Angeles-based African American newspaper, The California Eagle argued that Anderson’s stardom pointed to new hopes for interracial tolerance and black cultural and social achievement:

...two years ago American became conscious of a new thought in Negro comedy. It was really a revolution, [emphasis mine] for Jack Benny’s impudent butler-valet-chauffeur; “Rochester Van Jones” said all the things which a fifty year tradition of the stage proclaimed that American audiences will not accept from a black man. Time and again, “Rochester” outwitted his employer, and the nation’s radio audiences rocked with mirth. Finally, “Rochester” appeared with “Mistah Benny” in a

motion picture – a picture in which he consumed just as footage as the star. The nation’s movie audiences rocked with mirth. So, it may well be that “Rochester” has given colored entertainers a new day and a new dignity on screen and radio. (8).

Eddie Anderson’s cross-media and cross-racial stardom was very real in the U.S. popular media between 1940 and 1943. Unfortunately, a series of unforeseen events, and the growing political and social racial strife in the nation during the war, curtailed Anderson’s film career. Paramount director Sandrich tired of the Benny-Anderson series, while Benny was lured to Warner Bros and 20th Century Fox studios to appear in adaptations of recent Broadway comic plays. MGM attempted to build Anderson into a more prominent star, featuring him in its all-star black cast dramatic-musical production of *Cabin in the Sky* (Minnelli) with Lena Horne. *Cabin* was released in Summer 1943, just as race riots erupted in Detroit and other manufacturing and military base cities over labor strife. Timid film exhibitors did not promote Anderson’s film or his stardom for fear of sparking violence in their theatres. Racist white backlash against blacks gaining footholds of integration and prominence in American public life began spreading across the South, and Anderson’s subsequent appearance in Brewster’s *Millions* (Dwan 1945) caused the film to be banned in Memphis for its portrayal of pleasant interracial interactions. Film producers no longer were willing to take a chance on him. Anderson remained a major supporting character on the Jack Benny radio show in the postwar period and on Benny’s subsequent television program, and he remained beloved by white audiences. However, by war’s end, a new generation of vocal African-American media critics increasingly called the entertainment

media to task for their narrow depictions of African-American characters as servants and buffoons, Aunt Jemimas and Uncle Toms. Despite his popularity, the black press considered Eddie Anderson a symbol of outmoded representations, and it reduced coverage of him to a minimum in the latter half of the 1940s. Health problems dogged Anderson in the 1950s, and he ceased making the personal appearance tours to black theatre and nightclubs which had cemented his stardom in the African-American community. Although he remained the highest paid black performer on radio and television through the late 1950s, and a key member of the Jack Benny ensemble, the bright hopes of Eddie Anderson’s 1940 stardom were eclipsed.

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Stardom As Hollywood Historiography

On-screen Legend and Off-screen Practice in Robert Aldrich's The Big Knife

Emily Garman

The *Big Knife*, directed by Robert Aldrich and released by United Artists in 1955, was part of a cycle of quasi-film noirs from the 1950s, including *Sunset Blvd* (Billy Wilder, 1950) and *The Bad and the Beautiful* (Vincente Minnelli, 1952), that presented biting critiques of the Hollywood film industry. A screen adaptation of Clifford Odets' 1949 Broadway play and Hollywood allegory, *The Big Knife* provides an exposé of the movie business that also spotlights the industrial practices of film stardom, and, in particular, the studio star contract. The film presents this exclusive, long-term contract as a highly ambivalent tool, one that has brought stardom to the film's protagonist Charlie Castle (Jack Palance), but also left him artistically and morally bereft. Castle's reluctance to renew his contract with his studio drives the film's narrative, as does his hostile relationship with his producer Stanley Hoff, head of the fictional Hoff-Federated Pictures (played by a menacing bleached-blond Rod Steiger, rumoured to be based on Columbia studio head Harry

*1 Although Clifford Odets credited on a Columbia picture, his play *Golden Boy* was adapted for the screen by the studio in 1939. Margaret Brenman-Gibson contends that Harry Cohn's treatment of the New York playwrights Daniel Taradash and Lewis Metzler, who were hired by director Rouben Mamoulian to pen the *Golden Boy* screenplay, coupled with his then-wife actress Luise Rainer's experience under contract to MGM, motivated Odets' disdain for the movie "factory" (524).*

Cohn due to his contentious relationship with Odets)¹ (see fig. 1).

Odets' own experience in Hollywood ultimately influenced *The Big Knife's* cynical outlook on Hollywood and its star system. In 1936, he left New York to work as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, where he remained until the late 1940s (in fact, his play *The Big Knife* marked his return to New York). As *The Los Angeles Times* noted in their review of the film, Odets wrote the original story when he was "fed up" with the film industry. He poured "his loathing and indignation into a stage play of 'social significance' that played to moderate success on Broadway with John Garfield" in the Castle role (Scheuer 1).² By 1955, the playwright was back in Hollywood and "well fed" after the successful screen adaptations of two of his plays in *Clash by Night* (Fritz Lang, 1952) and *The Country Girl* (George Seaton, 1955) (1).

The *Big Knife's* emphatic and somewhat antiquated focus on the studio star contract make it a compelling example for a historiographic study of Hollywood stardom, because of the industrial context in which the film was produced. Odets based his original story on the heyday of the studio system, where binding long-term talent contracts were more commonplace, and movie moguls wielded a considerable amount of power over their productions. By the mid 1950s, Hollywood stars were no longer signing exclusive contracts with major studios as Castle does in the film. In fact, the power dynamic had shifted, with top stars often working independently on a freelance basis, earning a percentage of their film's box of-

office profits, and/or becoming producers of their own films that were in turn distributed by the major studios. Thus, how do we account for *The Big Knife's* anachronistic depiction of the Hollywood studio system - and the long-term option contract in particular - and what does this reveal about the postwar American film industry?

Using archival documents, including the Robert Aldrich collection, the Motion Picture Producers and Directors Association Production Code Administration (PCA) files, as well as industry trades and newspaper coverage on the film, this essay juxtaposes *The Big Knife's* onscreen portrait of Hollywood to actual off-screen film industry practices of the time—mainly A-list star negotiations to make films on a freelance basis, talent-turned-producers of their own independent productions, and major studios as distributors—to underscore how the film perpetuates distorted representations of stardom and the film business that belies the postwar studio system of the 1950s, which privileged talent. To highlight the disparity between the on-screen and off-screen practices of stardom in *The Big Knife*, I first examine the film's portrayal of Charlie Castle and Hollywood culture, and then scrutinize the film's production history, talent agreements, and its reception in the press. In doing so, I illuminate an inter-textual and reflexive approach to American film historiography. *The Big Knife's* indictment of the motion picture industry runs the risk of being taken as a valid reflection of the postwar Hollywood film industry at the time. How-

² Garfield's career trajectory resonated more with the fictionalized Charlie Castle. He was under exclusive contract to Warner Bros. from 1939 until 1946, and encountered much frustration with Warners' ruthless typecasting of his persona. Aldrich surmised the film may have fared better had Garfield been cast (the actor died in 1952) (Miller and Arnold 45).



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

AND
Miss SHELLEY WINTERS
AS 'DIXIE EVANS'



FIGURE 4

ever, an investigation of the off-screen production practices and talent negotiations that precipitated the making of the film suggests a counter-narrative of Hollywood stardom grounded in archival evidence that challenges the persistent image of the exploited and victimized film star. Closer analysis of the talent contracts of the cast and their director-producer, juxtaposed with the arduous on-screen experience of Castle, provides a nuanced and revisionist understanding of postwar film stardom in Hollywood.

The sequence in *The Big Knife* when Hoff coerces Castle to renew his long-term contract with Hoff-Federated Studios illuminates not only the extreme negative connotation that the studio star contract represents in the film's narrative, but also the popular legend about the all-encompassing paternal authority that the major Hollywood studios presumably held over talent at this time. Castle feels compelled to acquiesce to Hoff's demand that he renew his contract, as the studio has covered up his crime of killing a child in a drunk driving hit and run accident. In this scene, Hoff arrives at the star's mid-century modern home and invites the actor to join him at the races later in the afternoon. However, Castle declines the invitation, explaining that he does not intend to renew his contract beyond its seven-year time duration, indicating that he prefers to end his acting career and abandon Hollywood. This request incenses the producer, who interrogates his star, and in a tirade reminds Castle of all that Hoff-Federated has done to bolster his career.

Hoff declares with pen in hand to Castle, "You're not in the bargaining position! But I can't force you to sign, can I?"³ The musical score gets louder, using a drum roll to stress the actor's decision, while Castle's ineffective agent Nat Dazinger (played by Everett Sloan) and sly Hoff-Federated associate Smiley Coy (performed by Wendell Corey) look on from the background. The scene alternates long shots in crisp deep focus, which feature the wooden panels and large windows in the room, with tight medium close-ups to Hoff and Castle, depicting the actor as a caged animal who is trapped by his producer and the oppressive Hollywood "system." The actor finally yields and signs another seven-year contract, an act that leads to further decline, and ultimately his demise.

This depiction of the star contract is entirely in keeping with the concept of star servitude that has dominated both the public imagination and the scholarly discourse on the material conditions of stardom in the studio system, especially the seven-year, long-term option contract in the 1930s-40s. This exclusive contract tended to solely benefit studio executives at the actors' expense with controlling mandates and suspension clauses. Perhaps a model for the character of Charlie Castle, the actress Bette Davis is one of the most cited instances of star oppression in Hollywood. Her famous battles with parent studio Warner Brothers for increased creative control and discretion over her career, as a result of her long-term option contract with the studio, have largely become the accepted norm for studio stardom in American cinema.⁴ This absolute affiliation with a studio could restrict a star's autonomy, and as Thomas Schatz notes, "[t]he more

effectively a studio packaged and commodified its stars, the more restrictive the studios' and the public's shared perception of a star's persona tended to be" (75). Movie stardom, understood in this context, was what Tino Balio characterizes as a "dazzling illusion to the degradations of servitude" for actors working in Hollywood during the 1930s (134). However, this was not at all the case by the 1950s. In what Denise Mann calls the "postwar talent takeover," stars began to earn a cut of their films' box office profits and expanded their roles into the producer realm, actively developing projects and distributing them through the major studios. Thus, in postwar Hollywood, the Davis example of studio stardom was obsolete.

What is particularly striking about Charlie Castle's contract saga and the film's overall depiction of the star system is that it was largely outdated by 1955. By this point, the U.S. Supreme Court had delivered its 1948 Paramount decree, which declared the vertical integration monopoly of the Big Five studios (Paramount, Warner Brothers, Fox, RKO and MGM) illegal. Consequently, these studios were compelled to divest themselves of their theatre chains. Coupled with declining box office revenues and competition from the rival medium of television, the star system - grounded in long-term studio contracts - was gradually supplanted by a freelance talent and studio-distributor model, whereby talent individually negotiated with a studio or producer on a picture-by-picture basis. Furthermore, stars with box office clout had the potential to earn a sizeable percentage of their films' distribution gross profits in these

³ In the film, Hoff offers Castle a pen to sign the contract was from "a great American, General Douglas MacArthur" and Castle keeps the pen, declaring it is his only evidence that "the war is over."

⁴ For example, see Klaprat, "The Star as Market Strategy," for an insightful analysis on Davis' career.

⁵ Stars even experienced control and agency over their careers in the 1930s. See Carman, *Independent Stardom*, for an insightful revisionist examination of studio-era stardom.

freelance deals, a practice chiefly attributed to talent agent Lew Wasserman and his client, actor James Stewart in 1951.⁵

Indeed, *The Big Knife* itself was representative of the freelance talent system that has since become standard industry practice in Hollywood. The film was producer-director Robert Aldrich's first independent production venture. Shooting quickly in nine days and on a tight budget "without sacrificing quality," his dual producer-director role was indicative of Hollywood's shift from studio produced to talent independently producing films (Pryor X5). This dynamic brought story and creative personnel to a major studio together to distribute and release the film (in this case, *The Big Knife* was distributed by the newly revamped United Artists (UA), run by lawyers-turned-producers Arthur Krim and Robert Benjamin). As producer, Aldrich equally shared in any distribution gross with UA through a fifty-fifty split, and his cut would be further split should any star participate in the gross earnings (although no star appeared to earn any percentage of the box office earnings, perhaps because the film was not a substantial commercial success).⁶ *The Big Knife* also included freelance talent like Ida Lupino, cast as Castle's estranged wife Marion, herself a leader in the talent-turned-independent producer model via her company "The Filmmakers" (which she co-founded with ex husband, producer Collier Young and writer Malvin Wald in 1949) (*see fig. 2*). Nonetheless, this film disseminates several "myths" about Hollywood—star slavery contracts, inadequate weak agents, and patriarchal, dictator studio

bosses—even as the post-vertically integrated studio system, freelance talent production model was largely in place. How did the off-screen employment experience of the distinguished cast in the film compare to Castle's fictional contract in *The Big Knife*? The film's budget was \$423,000, \$260,000 of which was allotted for the actors' salaries, (the film featured a half dozen top-rated performers, including Palance, Lupino, Rod Steiger, Shelley Winters, and Jean Hagen) (Pryor X5). The film's lead star, Palance, was a freelance artist at this time. Although the actor signed a long-term contract in 1950 with Twentieth Century-Fox, he broke his contract to return to Broadway in 1951, and thus, risked what *The New York Times* noted as "professional suicide" (Schmit X5). Yet, Palance suffered no professional ramifications for his decision when he returned to Hollywood to play his immortal role of Jack Wilson in *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953). He signed on to *The Big Knife* as a freelance artist, represented by the Jaffe Agency, in 1954. Behind the scenes, Palance was an empowered actor, a significant disparity from the character he plays in Aldrich's film: a victim severed by the industry knife.

Perhaps the most conspicuous difference between on-screen stardom and the off-screen freelance talent negotiations that emerges from *The Big Knife* is the case of actress Shelley Winters and her contract for the film. Winters appears in only one scene - as down-on-her-luck actress, Dixie Evans - whose sole claim to fame in Hollywood is being the witness to Charlie Castle's hit and run accident (*see fig. 3*). A series of production memos in the Robert Aldrich Papers housed at the American Film Institute underscore her significant contractual agency behind the screen for her relatively small role in the film. Furthermore, Winters'

off-screen bargaining contradicts the manipulation tactics and ironclad authority of studio boss Stanley Hoff that is apparent in the film. A United Artists memo from April 28, 1955 penned by Leon Roth of UA underlines how Winters' freelance status made her exempt from any promotional campaigns or consumer goods tie-ins associated with *The Big Knife*: "Three marketing tie-ups (NO-Cal, Nebel Hosiery, Duane Jewelry) were discussed with Winters, and she informs me that as a freelance player, she doesn't do any tie-ups unless she was paid for them."

Winters also enforced the billing clause outlined by her contract, which stipulated that—in the film's credits and in any publicity—she would be billed as "Miss Shelley Winters" (*see fig. 4*). She protested UA's trade publicity advertising campaigns that did not adhere to this clause. UA claimed that their actions relative to this clause were justified, stating that "the provisions of this section shall not apply to group, listing or so-called 'teaser' advertising, publicity, or exploitation, or special advertising, etc.," and "the objections advanced by Miss Winters/her agents do not hold."⁷ But Winters and her agent Paul Kohner demurred, as the following memo penned by Robert Aldrich on July 29, 1955 attests. Aldrich wrote to UA CEOs Krim and Benjamin that "Paul Kohner was contacted, who in turn contacted Shelley Winters and a request was made that she waive a contractual obligation that she be billed as "Miss Shelley Winters," but unfortunately (at least unfortunately for her), she refused to approve this change." Consequently, Aldrich and UA had to correct the earlier advertising to be an "exact interpretation" of the actress's billing specifications. As these produc-

⁶ Aldrich explained that while film was a critical success, it was a financial disappointment chiefly because audiences could not accept Jack Palance as a movie star who could "not decide on whether to take \$5000 per week" (Miller and Arnold 45).

⁷ Memo dated August 15, 1955 letter from UA to Winikus, Robert Aldrich Papers, AFI.

tion memos insinuate, Winters' powerful bargaining position off-screen differed substantially from her marginalized starlet character.

It is also worthwhile to examine how the industry trades and contemporary reviews of the film called attention to the inconsistencies in *The Big Knife's* depiction of Hollywood in comparison to current industry practices. This began before the film went into production, with PCA head Geoffrey Shurlock offering a warning to Aldrich in a March 10, 1955 memo about the film's projected image of Hollywood:

It was our feeling in reading this screenplay that *The Big Knife* very bitterly peels the hide off our industry. The conviction naturally arises that we do ourselves a great disservice in fouling our own nest, so to speak. The indictment of our industry is so specific and so unrelieved that it has the one-dimensional effect of labeling us all "phony." Of course, if the finished picture should prove to be such an ambassador of ill will, then we would be faced with a serious public relations problem.

The major industry trades echoed these initial reservations in their reviews of the film in the fall of 1955. Although *The Big Knife* premiered at the Venice Film Festival and won its Silver Lion award, it received mixed critical reception in the United States. The Hollywood Reporter writer Jack Moffitt postulated that while "self criticism" may be "healthy," he saw "nothing salutary in accusing ourselves of crimes we're not guilty of" in the industry, that the film does not even "trouble to say that the abuses set forth are not typical", and that "[n]othing extenuating is offered" (3). Variety underscored the discrepancy in the film's portrayal of stardom as compared to the reality of Hollywood. On the matter of Castle's resistance

to signing with Hoff because it would make him a "slave," the magazine contended that this "is just as inconsistent with present relationships between big lots and the top names" (6). They also dispelled the notion that Castle's contract extended up to fourteen years: "Furthermore, there ain't no such animal, legally or professionally, as a '14-year contract'; California law limits any deal to seven annums."⁸ Hence, even at the time of the film's release, *The Big Knife's* exaggeration of a bygone star system was deemed obsolete within the industry itself.

In contrast to the industry press, Clifford Odets was delighted with the film version of his play, and he praised *The Big Knife* in a 1955 *The New York Times* op-ed:

To me, one of the most important indications that Hollywood is finally ready to take a responsible place in the community of arts is the film of my play The Big Knife...It represents a milestone (naturally not because it is my play) in the affairs of a community that has always maintained a clannishness and secrecy about itself and which...has presented generally unified opposition to projects it considered detrimental. (X5)

Although the writer championed the film's "honest" disclosure of the film business in the face of criticism, *The Big Knife* was no longer an accurate reflection of Hollywood in the 1950s. What's more, Odets' off-screen negotiations to sell the film rights to his play show how he also benefited from the postwar changes that favored film talent. He sold

the play for \$10,000 to Aldrich, and would split the distribution profits equally with the director. Hence, it was in Odets' best interest to endorse the film and encourage box office attendance with a positive review.

James Naremore contends that self referential Hollywood noirs like *The Big Knife* "seem to reflect Hollywood's guilty conscience and its sense that an era was ending" given that these films coincide with various crises in the film business: the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings and the resulting Blacklist, television's encroachment on the film audience, and the Paramount Decree (328). Although *The Big Knife's* tone may have resonated with these changes, this essay has demonstrated how the film's version of Hollywood did not at all reflect the actual postwar muscle that movie talent flexed off-screen in 1955. Furthermore, this essay has considered how *The Big Knife's* portrayal of stardom differs significantly from the star system in practice in the 1950s. Perhaps this revelation alone is not profound given that in Hollywood, sensationalism often trumps fact. Nevertheless, the production materials of *The Big Knife* historicize the American film industry as it adapted to new economic conditions and developed new production practices, which bolstered the power of top talent in postwar Hollywood, even as *The Big Knife* itself ignored these significant changes. Moreover, my analysis has suggested how film historians can marry together two methodologies - film textual analysis and archival research - to study Hollywood stardom in its various contexts. By doing so, we can gain further insight into the inter-textual discourses that are at work in Hollywood exposés such as *The Big Knife*, as well as in behind-the-scenes production practices. This particularly comes to the fore in

⁸ In the film, Hoff asks Castle to sign a seven-year contract, however, various reviews of the film at the time erroneously reported it as a fourteen-year contract.

contract negotiations between talent, agents, and producers, which shaped the film industry at specific historical moments. The array of primary and secondary sources available for *The Big Knife* act as a prism through which to analyze the narrative depiction of star contracts alongside the original negotiations of the film's production. This hybrid methodology enables scholars to contextualize Hollywood and its star system through a revisionist lens, thereby discerning film history both on and beyond the screen.

I close with a reflection from Robert Aldrich himself on the making of *The Big Knife*, in which the director considered whether the old Hollywood studio system was better or worse for filmmakers given the rise of "freelance media conglomerate Hollywood" in the 1970s:

When we made *The Big Knife*, Harry Cohn and Jack Warner were still in full flower, and

[Louis] Mayer was only recently fallen. Nobody had seen the abyss. We'd had twenty years of petty dictators running the industry during which time everybody worked and everybody got paid, maybe not enough, but they weren't on relief. Seventeen years later you wonder if the industry is really healthy in terms of creativity. Are we making more or better pictures without central control? But when everybody worked under those guys, they hated them. But, you know, you can have a certain fondness for the way Cohn and Mayer got things done. Cohn took a while to realize that I did *The Big Knife*. Halfway through the "honeymoon" period when I was signed to Columbia, he asked me, "Did you do the *Big Knife*?" I said, "Yes." Cohn said, "You son of a bitch. If I'd known that you never would have been here. (58-59)

Aldrich's remarks highlight how *The Big Knife* was released

at a transitional moment in Hollywood, in which the aging studio moguls and their vertically-integrated, monopolistic studio system was superseded by a new model, one that was led by talent agents, savvy stars-turned-producers, and studios acting as distributors to newly independent theatre chains. These postwar industry shifts are not apparent in the film's narrative representation of Hollywood, but they are revealed by the primary documents of the film's production. It is only by consulting the film, its historical context, and primary documents together that scholars can gain a multi-faceted understanding of postwar Hollywood stardom in *The Big Knife*.

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Art in the Cage of Its Technological Reproducibility:

Understanding Nicolas Cage's Current Star Persona

Zeke Saber

Given his “memeification” over the past decade, the time has come to give an accurate appraisal of Nicolas Cage’s star persona. This task is potentially complicated because much of the actor’s recent increase in popularity must be attributed to ironic appreciation rather than sincere admiration. Even as user-created compilation videos and online forums have made Cage’s visage ubiquitous across the Internet, they have done so primarily to mock him. Despite—or perhaps thanks

to—such devoted ridicule, the process of dissecting and reproducing his film performances through remixes and online rituals has allowed Cage’s Internet “fans” to elucidate what makes those performances resonant. Rather than burying Cage’s star persona under ironic noise, the actor’s memeification has in fact helped to excavate from his films the immanent sublimity of his performance style.

Before launching into such an argument, it would be wise to

first outline how the Internet has absorbed and deployed Cage as an actor and persona. Though lauded by critics for his work in films such as *Raising Arizona* (Coen, 1987), *Leaving Las Vegas* (Figgis, 1995), *Adaptation* (Jonze, 2002), and *Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call New Orleans* (Herzog, 2009), he has generally made a habit of alternating between offbeat, complex portrayals, and outlandish, lowbrow fare. In fact, the release of one of the latter sort, *The Wicker Man* (Labute, 2006), may have been the exact moment when Cage “became the star of the Internet” (Suzanne-Mayer 1). The film itself is a remake of the British horror classic also titled *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), and concerns a policeman named Edward Malus (played by Cage). Malus and his ex-fiancée, Willow Woodward (Kate Beahan), conduct a search for their daughter, who has gone missing on an island populated by neo-pagans. Attempting to replicate the supernatural dread of the original, Labute’s film instead comes off as an unremarkable thriller. Unremarkable, that is, save Cage’s unrelenting and melodramatic performance. At times distorting his face into expressionistic horror as a deluge of bees comes down upon him, and at other times punching neo-pagans with animalistic strength, Cage exhibits the sort of non-naturalistic excess that so often transforms contemporary acting into unintentional comedy. These moments have not been lost on the film’s (initially unwitting) audience, and in its wake emerged a YouTube compilation of its most ridiculous and unintentionally funny moments. Assembling disparate clips into a cohesive whole, the video unmoors Cage’s acting from the film’s temporality and puts it to use in service of a larger goal: humour by means of accumulation. The plurality and rhythm of the clips intensify their effect, and this concept is played out further on the YouTube platform a couple

years later in the more comprehensive (and aptly named) video, “Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit.” This video differs from the first in that it compiles scenes of intensity and madness from Cage’s entire filmography, and his vocalizations are mixed with Clint Mansell’s epic composition “Lux Aeterna” from the Requiem for a Dream (Aronofsky, 2000) soundtrack.

Taken in conjunction, these two compilation videos are crucial to our understanding of Cage’s contemporary star persona. Using clips from actual source material, the videos are products of an audience that has learned to use technological tools to “write” using images and sounds. As Lawrence Lessig explains in his article, “RW, Revised,” such remixes approximate great written texts in that they “quote” from sources in order to create entirely new and often quite resonant works (1085, 1092). In fact, Lessig suggests that remix artists feel compelled to use the actual source material – at the risk of copyright infringement – because they believe that their remixes retain the “aura” inherent in the source material (1088). This suggestion of course harks to Walter Benjamin’s essay on “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” in which he argues that art’s aura withers in the age of technological reproducibility (233). More specifically, he considers film to be the medium that best represents such mechanical reproduction: “The social significance of film, even – and especially – in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage” (233). Benjamin posits that if cinema overcomes the aesthetic distance that isolates art from the “real world,” the medium is thus able to break down art’s aura to offer audiences a more immediate engagement with their everyday realities. Thus, the mechanical reproduction of images and art through technol-

ogy becomes an essentially democratizing process. But, if Benjamin feels that art’s aura withers in this age of technological reproducibility, then his argument is at odds with Lessig’s conception of remix artists who sense the transference of an aura from source material to their videos. What are we to make of this dialectic? More pertinently, what are we to make of the artistic resonance of a remix like “Nicholas Cage Losing His Shit” and the fact that it has imbued Cage with a certain type of online emanation?

...we could say that mechanical reproduction deprives performance of authority and ‘aura,’ even as it greatly increases the possibility of stardom

Ultimately, the answer lies in the style of Cage’s acting. Highlighted by these remixed videos is a particular mode of acting, each clip catching Cage as he releases a certain restless, suppressed hysteria. If his actions are sometimes described as “melodramatic,” it is because the remixes condense these moments into an archive of movement from the sublime to the ridiculous. In the case of the “Nicolas Cage Losing His Shit” video, Clint Mansell’s musical composition pairs melos with Cage’s drame, and serves to highlight the exaggerated emotions he displays. Spotting such exaggerated emotions, frequent as they are, transforms the actor’s most impassioned recordings into something quite humorous; and where viewers find unintentional humour they also find the record of drama’s failure. But as the videos have become more popular, Cage’s star persona has been rehabilitated, and in many ways the essential dramatic success of his acting has been heightened. The “Losing” video inundates viewers with examples of Cage’s primal intensity, but by the end they commonly feel inspiration rather than pity. As YouTube comments like

“Almost forgot to watch this today” suggest, many return to the video long after the humour has worn off. In light of the emotional power invoked and provoked, what brings a video like “Losing” to the level of art is Cage’s acting, taken out of the context of its original source material and put into a new performative space: a site on the Internet, or in the case of these videos, YouTube.

James Naremore, in his chapter “Protocols” from *Acting in the Cinema* (1988), offers a helpful outline of how these performative spaces work: “When art theatricalizes contingency [...] it puts a conceptual bracket around a force field of sensations, an ever-present stratum of sound, shade, and movement that both precedes meaning and makes it possible” (204). He goes on to reference Julia Kristeva’s concept of the “anaphora,” which she defines as “the gesture which [sic] indicates, establishes relations and eliminates entities” (Kristeva 270). In many ways, a site like YouTube acts as an anaphora, or the primary gesture that signals a separation of audience and performer and the commencement of an ostentatious display of acting. The very architecture of its page layout predisposes visitors to become audience members, as it forces them to view the video frame before being allowed to scroll down to view or contribute to the comment section. By the time a visitor sees the comment section, the video/performance has buffered and started. This online anaphora is the ideal host for remixes like the “Losing” video, for their existence within such an architecture automatically ordains them as having meaning and thus the potential to become art. Naremore, meanwhile, would argue that a platform like YouTube, which acts as an anaphora for these types of remixes, contributes to the withering away of art’s aura: “By slightly extending Walter Benjamin’s well-known argument about painting in the age

of photography, we could say that mechanical reproduction deprives performance of authority and 'aura,' even as it greatly increases the possibility of stardom" (206). However, in the singular case of Nicolas Cage's memeification, that argument does not quite convince.

Cage's case is unique due to his ability to tap into a performance style that recalls the work of silent film actors who relied primarily on their faces and bodies to express. Though the remixes do derive humour from Cage's dialogue ("Killing me won't bring back your goddamn honey!"), most attention is paid to his face in close-up as it elongates, twists, and distorts into masks of surprise, horror, and insanity. In fact, much of Cage's resonance for Internet fans can be surmised in the rampant reproduction of his visage online. Whole websites, such as the blog "Nic Cage as Everyone," have been devoted to the sole cause of curating photoshopped images of Cage's face on others' bodies. There is even a subreddit on Reddit.com, titled "One True God," where those who are devoted to Nicolas Cage gather to share these face-swaps and other Cage-related memes. In the subreddit's description, the cult's scribes claim that Cage's "light guides us away from John Travolta, and saves us from bees." The deification of Cage as the "One True God" is done ironically, but the ritual of pasting his face over the faces of others hints at a deeper sort of worship. To Bela Balázs, a Hungarian-born writer who was one of the first comprehensive theorists of cinema, the close-up of the face "must be the lyrical essence of the entire drama" of a film (75). Indeed, in Balázs' theory, cinema brings to light the "essence" of things (objects, people): "cinema's most significant feature is its capacity to reveal truths about reality invisible to the naked human eye" (Turvey 86). In their insistence on pasting close-ups of Cage's

face onto images of others, Cage's online fans betray a desire that all publicly scrutinized figures measure up to his ability to express "that indeterminate something" (to borrow Balázs' phrase) through a language of gestures and facial expressions (Balázs 76). In Cage's face, in Cage's mode of performance, there is evidence of a more primordial signifier of human imagination and emotion, and all the while it is expressed in a language more befitting of contemporary visual culture.

In some ways, the technical reproducibility of Cage's performances through remixes/online ritual has evinced what made those performances artistic in the first place. As Lessig explains, these user-generated remixes and online technological experiments do not assert truths; they show them (1088). Read in light of Cage's memeification, Lessig's contention suggests two intriguing ideas: 1) the authority and aura of the actor's performances were degraded in the process of being filmed, but, 2) the aura of such performances may be rediscovered in the process of being decontextualized. Despite what may be ironic intentions, when Internet users create online videos and forums that heighten awareness of the artificial style of Cage's acting, they actually catalyze a revelatory process whereby the artistry of that style becomes foregrounded. Previously passive film viewers have become Internet users who insert themselves into the creative act by taking back control of the machinery, and in so doing they have revealed the auratic quality of Cage's performance style. Their creative energy—whether spent ironically or not—has contributed to the rediscovery of sublimity in Cage's acting performances; any consideration of his star persona must reckon with the inarguably devoted and percipient nature of those who might mock him.

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Julianne Moore Subversive Star As Performer

Linda C. Riedmann

Julianne Moore is a performer who approaches her work with versatility. She is active in film and TV; commercial and independent sectors; diverse genres; and plays supporting and lead roles despite her stardom, which was solidified in 2015 with her Academy Award for *Still Alice* (Westmoreland/Glatzer, 2014), a triumph after four previous nominations. This makes her a particularly interesting subject for star image study. Christine Geraghty draws attention to the importance of studying female stars as operating differently than male stars both in the industry and in discourse (Geraghty). She argues that women have historically been denied recognition for their acting and have found an alternative way to stardom through celebrity, which places its focus not on skill and talent, but on the investigation of the star's private life (Geraghty 196-197). This is enforced due to "the common association in popular culture between women and the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (Geraghty 196). Following another association with femininity, Karen Hollinger notes that female stars tend to be approached in relation to their beauty and image rather than their craft (4). Although Julianne Moore does not escape these trends entirely, I argue that the construction of her star image both on and off-screen has allowed her to inhabit them in a subversive rather than affirmative manner. This essay explores how Moore opposes Geraghty's

argument through her status as an actress as well as the meanings of her star image, proving to be a role model that women can safely look up to.

Moore has reiterated many times that her family is her priority above all else and that she considers being a mother and wife her most enriching role (Cochrane). Yet, she has insisted on keeping her private life private (Mackenzie). She rejects the concept of celebrity and has attracted little tabloid attention, inciting Suzie Mackenzie to ask "Who is Julianne Moore?" in response to her proportionally little known public profile despite a career spanning over 25 years. I argue that what allowed her to do so is that her image has from the start of her career been built upon her work, making her a star-as-performer in Geraghty's classification, a category historically reserved for male actors. Geraghty

writes, "The claim to stardom as performer depends on the work of acting being put on display and contrasts to stars-as-celebrities who can become famous for 'being themselves' and stars-as-professionals who act as themselves" (93). Mackenzie has likened her to great male actors such as Marlon Brando, Al Pacino and Jack Nicholson, arguing that they all master the craft of identifying their roles with inner elements of themselves while making themselves disappear behind their characters. What this recalls is the Method, according to Geraghty a characteristic of the star-as-performer and defined by Colin Counsell as a respected acting technique favouring "an increased emphasis on the significance of a character's inner life and the signs by which it could be deduced" and "a height-



ened 'emotionalism'" (Counsell, 56). The applicability of this style to Moore's performances seems fitting considering that she has been called the "queen of the big-screen breakdown" by Oliver Burkeman for her portrayals of troubled women who remain composed until a breaking point. She is further known for a strength to find the human within every character, likeable or unlikable, which has gained her a reputation for being risky and fearless (Waterman). Moore herself has described her technique as far from the Method on the basis that she believes in being present in the moment of performance, but does not stay in character off the set or even in-between takes (Wareman). On *Inside The Actors Studio*, she further reiterated that her secret for portraying strong emotion is being relaxed rather than tensing up and putting herself into that heightened emotional state through memory recall or similar techniques common for the Method. Nonetheless, her acting has come to be seen as an outstanding achievement on a par with male Method actors, positioning her counter to the perception of this technique as predominantly male that has long denied women access to the category of star-as-performer (Geraghty 197-198). Her acclaimed roles in Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Magnolia* (1999) further enforce her link to the Method as she acts as part of an ensemble alongside Mark Wahlberg, Burt Reynolds and Philip Seymour-Hoffman. Ensemble performances, as Geraghty notes, have come to be seen as another aspect particular to Method acting (194).

Moore further needs to be regarded as an impersonator, another characteristic of the star-as-performer according to Geraghty. Impersonation as opposed to personification – "the fusion of the role actors play with their personalities" so that the role is always seen to be a version of the

star him/herself (King, 46) – relies on "a distinction between star and role" (Geraghty 192) and does not necessitate audience knowledge of the stars' private self in order to understand the performance (195). Moore has stressed that she is always aware that she is playing a character and not herself and has stated that this allows her to take on challenging and disturbing, if rewarding, roles (*Inside the Actors Studio*). Savage Grace (Tom Kalin, 2007), in which she plays a mother murdered by her son after a long-term incestuous relationship, is only one example. Her clarity on the split between character and self is also

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the source of her adaptability to roles of different scale, diverse genres, time periods, modes of filmmaking and directors. She attributes this to her itinerant childhood that has made her mutable and quick to adapt and has taught her that "How you behave, how you act, is not necessarily who you are" (Galloway). Moore hence successfully escapes Hollinger's observation that female stars tend to be perceived as "being" rather than "acting" due to their acting abilities being "more naturalized than those of male stars, who are much more likely to be described as highly skilled and well-trained professionals whose success is the result of hard work and mastery of the craft of acting, rather than of their physical attractiveness and natural talent" (55). This ability coupled with her resistance to publicize her private life, which minimizes the chances of mediating the perception of her roles through personal detail, has allowed Moore to build an image as

a skilled professional and incited Mackenzie to call her "the most talented actress of her generation." Martin Shingler notes that the challenge facing actors is to develop a range of acting styles and genres while maintaining a distinctive idiolect from film to film and concludes that "this requirement suggests that while physical and vocal attractiveness might enable them to stand out from their fellow performers, ultimately their longevity as film stars demands much more" (90). Having established that Moore fulfills the criteria of versatility and craft, it becomes clear that this is crucial to the success of her career that started late for Hollywood standards when she was already twenty-nine and has peaked in 2015 at fifty-five with her Academy Award win.

Having discussed Moore's status as an actress that shifts the focus for meaning construction away from her personal life and onto her on-screen persona, an analysis of this meaning further enforces my claim of Moore as a subversive performer as she participates in the negotiation of identity markers including gender, sexuality, race, class and ability. Although Moore has incorporated several roles of strong, powerful and public women such as FBI agent Clarice Starling in *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001) or president Alma Coin in *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 1 & 2* (Francis Lawrence, 2014/2015) as well as explicitly countercultural roles such as feminist artist Maude Lebowski in *The Big Lebowski* (Coen Brothers, 1998), Moore's specialty are fundamentally sympathetic portrayals of troubled women, often mothers and housewives. While this implies a link to "the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (196) that Geraghty sees as intrinsically linked to female actresses, Moore refutes the conservative connotations of that link. Instead of simply portraying social stereotypes of women and

fetishized objects of the voyeuristic male gaze, which according to Hollinger have limited feminist approaches to the star-actress (54), Moore's portrayals expose the social institutions and rules that underpin her characters' plights. This is particularly applicable to her most iconic appearances as unhappy 1950s suburban housewives in *The End of the Affair* (Neil Jordan, 1999), *The Hours* (Stephen Daldry, 2002) and *Far From Heaven* (Todd Haynes, 2002), all of which brought her Oscar nominations. *Affair* features her as unhappily married Sarah Miles in 1946 who follows her true feelings and begins a troubled, but passionate affair with a reporter. In *Hours*, she plays Laura Brown, a depressed and pregnant mother of a young son who contemplates suicide before deciding to abandon her family. As Cathy Whitaker in *Heaven*, a beloved socialite, housewife and mother with a sense for justice unusual for the time, she discovers her husband's homosexuality and falls in love with African-American gardener Raymond. As she goes through a divorce and is shunned by her community for speaking to Raymond, Cathy is forced to abide by the unwavering conservatism of her time. While all three women suffer under societal constraints, Laura is the only one strong enough to break out of it while Sarah's plight is ended by death and Cathy remains a slave to her situation. Geraghty, quoting Counsell, suggests that Method acting has been destructive to female actresses because of its emphasis on the divided self that in relation to women has been associated with neurosis, hence demonizing their characters as victim or villainess (198). However, even if many of Moore's characters including Sarah, Laura and Cathy appear as neurotic, she illuminates the reason thereof as an outcome of social hegemonic restraints linked to white, heterosexual patriarchy, and hence renders them deserving of understanding if not always compassion. As Moore

has stated, "I never care that [my characters] are 'strong'. I never care that they're even affirmative. I look for that thing that's human and recognizable and emotional; and then to render that truthfully" (*Inside the Actors Studio*).

What becomes unmistakable when examining Moore's filmography is that her approach to what is "human and recognizable and emotional" is guided by a strong anti-discriminatory attitude towards the human condition and human behaviour. Several of Moore's other films contain direct inversions of "the private sphere of personal relationships and domesticity" (Geraghty 196) as they negotiate women's traditional roles within that sphere as mothers and housewives in relation to various identity mark-

She is a politically liberal atheist, a campaigner for gun control, a pro-choice activist for Planned Parenthood (Galloway), an ally to the LGBT community and an avid supporter of marriage equality (Cochrane).

ers. In *Still Alice*, a linguistics professor's decline of ability due to a diagnosis of early on-set Alzheimer's forces husband and children to reconsider their duties within the family. In *Boogie Nights*, her character negotiates class, status, the responsibility of being a good mother and the pain of failing as Amber Waves, a porn star unsuccessfully seeking custody of her son. Class further appears in *Magnolia* in which she plays morphine-addicted Linda Partridge who realizes too late that she loves the dying man she married for money and failed responsibility haunts her portrayal of psychologically abusive rockstar mother Susanna in *What Maisie Knew* (Siegel/ McGehee, 2013). Questions of sexuality are essential to the acclaimed comedy *The Kids Are Alright* (Lisa Cholodenko, 2010) in which she

plays lesbian mother Jules in an alternative version of the nuclear family and in the recent *Freeheld* (Peter Sollett, 2015) in which she fights for her partner's right to receive her pension benefits as a lesbian police officer with terminal cancer. Lastly, her portrayal of aging, psychologically disturbed Hollywood actress Havana Segrand in *Maps to the Stars* (David Cronenberg, 2014) provides a clear idea of Moore's attitude towards public scrutiny and society's destructive treatment of women, and even more specifically women in Hollywood.

As I have previously mentioned, Moore herself certainly does not escape this scrutiny entirely. In 2009 she was included amongst *People Magazine's* "World's Most Beautiful People" and, an aging actress at fifty-five, has advertised for anti-aging products for L'Oréal and posed for Bulgari. In 2015, *Harper's Bazaar* featured her on its cover with the tagline "fabulous at every age." Despite adamantly opposing plastic surgery and embracing aging as a natural process (Lipworth), Moore partakes – willingly or not – in the celebration of "successful aging" that Josephine Dolan describes as the problematic process of drawing attention to the continued beauty of the aging body of female stars, hence rendering them the norm by hiding the labour that goes into them (342-351). Yet, Moore has over the years taken agency over these processes by consciously extending her sense for social justice and diversity beyond her screen-presence. She is a politically liberal atheist, a campaigner for gun control, a pro-choice activist for Planned Parenthood (Galloway), an ally to the LGBT community and an avid supporter of marriage equality (Cochrane). Moore does not dispute being a feminist and in relation to the relevance of the women's movements of the 60s/70s has said, "We can talk about glass ceilings, but we have

to remember there was a time when there wasn't even a door. I don't take any of it for granted for a minute" (Cochrane). At the 2015 SAG Awards she refused to walk her hand down the E! manicom that showcases actresses' fingernails, calling it "humiliating" and aligning herself with an increase in female actresses "taking a stand against red-carpet antics many find sexist" (O'Neil). Lastly, together with the women from *Still Alice*, she has started the My Brain Campaign that aims to support female Alzheimer's patients and she has spoken out for the Tuberosus Sclerosis Alliance. Moore continues to publicly display her views and support on Twitter, trending hashtags such as #endalz, #IAMTSC and #WomenOfWorth, despite receiving angry responses (Galloway).

In conclusion, while her private life as a mother is rather conventional and "ordinary"—apart from the fact that her husband Bart Freundlich is 10 years younger than her and, of course, that both are professionals in the film industry—Moore has portrayed tortured, troubled, depressed, sick, alienated or otherwise disadvantaged women too numerous to list. The ability to do so, as I have shown, comes from her defiance of celebrity and inhabiting the status of star-as-performer. Hence her screen work is more important to the construction of her image than her private life and her acting has come to be recognized as a craft rather than personification that would attempt to create a link between her characters and personal self. Moore hence opposes the gender bias of the industry addressed by Geraghty that positions female actresses as inferior to male actors by shifting the focus onto their

Her ability to portray even the most aberrant and misunderstood characters as either sympathetic or at least understandable, combined with her passionate and tireless off-screen activism for human rights and social justice, testifies to her status as a progressive woman of the 21st century who values diversity.

image, appearance and private life. Furthermore, even if she might not be unable to escape Hollywood ageism and sexism fully, she has made it clear that she does not embrace either through her refusal to partake in sexist red-carpet antics and through her status as an aging actress who has found more rather than less success following her 40th birthday, the critical age for women in Hollywood. When asked to speak on ageism, Moore simply said, "If you're 50 you're never going to be 50 ever again, so enjoy being 50" (Lipworth). In regards to her on-screen persona, Moore has proven that a female actress can carry

a film and that playing stereotypical female roles of mother and wife does not necessarily equal regression and passivity, but that it important to show these roles can be inhabited alternatively (i.e. by a lesbian couple) or to illuminate the struggles fought by women who have been forced into these roles unwillingly over decades. Lastly, her ability to portray even the most aberrant and misunderstood characters as either sympathetic or at least understandable, combined with her passionate and tireless off-screen activism for human rights and social justice, testifies to her status as a progressive woman of the 21st century who values diversity. As, in Tom Ford's words, "one of the greatest actresses working today, but [...] also a wonderful human being," Moore is a subversive star who continues to provide challenges to Hollywood and social hegemony both on- and off-screen.

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Kelly, Astaire, and Male Musical Stardom

The Hollywood Song-and-Dance Man Reconsidered

Kate Saccone

In *Only Entertainment*, Richard Dyer argues, “because entertainment is a common-sense, ‘obvious’ idea, what is really meant and implied by it never gets discussed” (19). The same can be said for the category of the “Hollywood-song-and-dance man”—a male performer within the classical film musical paradigm—whose true complexity is often obscured by its tautological efficiency (i.e. he is a man who sings and dances within the world of the musical). However, any attempt to discuss the category’s more complex social, historical, or cinematic dimensions

must wrestle with an inevitable obstacle – the pervasive visibility and powerful stardom of the two most well-known Hollywood song-and-dance men, Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire. Thus, in order to revitalize our definition of the cinematic category of the Hollywood-song-and-dance man and to broaden its dimensions to include other male musical stars, we must first deal with the specific discourses surrounding Kelly and Astaire’s stardom. Parallel to this is a discussion of YouTube, which allows us space to celebrate a more nuanced, inclusive, and multi-dimensional “Hollywood-song-and-dance man” and the lesser-known performers who have contributed to the category’s popularity.

Throughout this article, I rely on “The Babbitt and the Bromide” sequence from the 1946 MGM musical revue, *Ziegfeld Follies*. This self-reflexive number, directed by Vincente Minnelli and featuring Kelly and Astaire as

themselves, is a rare duet between the two stars and is largely ignored compared to their more iconic work. One reason for this is that the sequence is an extractable cameo within *Ziegfeld Follies*’ disconnected, variety show-like format and does not fit with Kelly and Astaire’s usual films, in which they play fictional characters existing in a larger, romance-driven narrative.¹ The importance of “The Babbitt and the Bromide,” however, is in this very difference, or, as Dyer argues, the fact that it “...constitute[s] inflections, exceptions to, subversions of the vehicle pattern and the star image” (“Stars” 412). Calling each other “Gene” and “Fred” and self-reflexively discussing their careers during the number, the two men are contained as themselves within the sequence and not required to have a presence as leading men outside of this musical performance (see fig. 1). The number is a celebration of Kelly and Astaire as talented dancers,

*1 This is not to suggest that all of Kelly and Astaire’s appearances are as characters within a cohesive narrative since, for example, “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” is the only time that Kelly appears in *Words and Music* (1948). However, they are most known for their star vehicles.*



choreographers, and musical stars; its dissimilarity to their other work creates the opportunity to reconsider the concept of the Hollywood song-and-dance man.

The Stardom of Kelly and Astaire

How is the Hollywood song-and-dance man affected by the discourses surrounding Kelly and Astaire? How is their centrality within film history constructed and maintained? At the most basic level, we must recognize these two men as talented dancers, prolific choreographers, and artists with tremendous control behind-the-scenes. However, skill is not the sole factor in Kelly and Astaire's ability to metonymically stand for the figure of the Hollywood song-and-dance man. In more complex ways, the issue resides in how film scholarship continually presents them as not only synonymous with the dance-heavy musicals of the 1930s to the mid-1950s, but also as the form's "ambassadors." For example, Kelly and Astaire are the go-to subjects for larger theoretical discussions of the musical's structural, aesthetic, ideological, and technological debates.² In these discussions, scholarly work on the musical and investigations of Kelly and Astaire's careers become one and the same. Additionally, the way we talk about them as scholars and fans illustrates how these two specific performers are entangled in a construction of stardom based on difference. The majority of the work published on Kelly and

Astaire concerns their opposing styles. For example, in *The World in a Frame*, Leo Braudy proposes that Kelly and Astaire's styles each resonate within their respective social and historical moments – Astaire's 1930s musicals speaking to the European

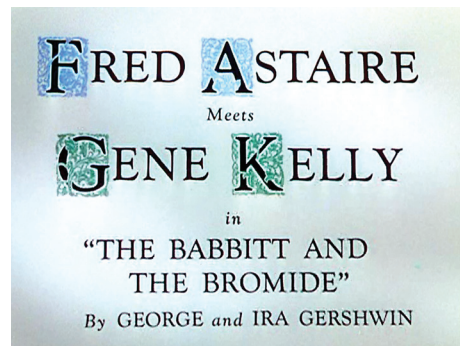


Fig. 1 "The Babbit and the Bromide" Title Card (*Ziegfeld Follies*, 1946). Screenshot.

influence of the previous decade and the Great Depression while Kelly's more optimistic, patriotic, and vernacular films are unique to the World War II context (148, 155). Through repeated emphasis on their "representative" positions as artists with consistent yet dissimilar (successful) styles, larger social functions, and control behind-the-scenes, film scholars continue to treat Kelly and Astaire as Hollywood song-and-dance men par excellence, leaving little room for other contenders.

"The Babbit and the Bromide" provides a visualization of how the concept of the Hollywood song-and-dance man has become tethered to this romantic reading of Kelly and Astaire. The continual emphasis on the two performers' differences often frames

them in a competition of sorts. Viewers are encouraged to choose a side – picking Kelly's muscular athleticism or Astaire's theatrical elegance. Of course, this was more of an imaginary rivalry – a myth guiding our construction and reception of the musical genre. According to Kelly, "the public insisted on thinking of us as rivals... Well nothing could have been further from the truth" (qtd. in Hirschhorn 200). This assumed rivalry is playfully commented upon from the start of "The Babbit and the Bromide," as we are introduced to Kelly and Astaire in a way that mirrors their perceived relationship. The sequence begins with Kelly's heavy taps interrupting Astaire's light and ephemeral steps – an aural and visual parallel to the former's presumed disruptive presence as the "new boy" in Hollywood in opposition to the latter's more established career. The choreography that comprises "The Babbit and the Bromide" revolves around the competitive sparring between the two men, as they playfully kick, trip, and bump into each other. The number suggests – by good-humouredly giving the audience the rivalry they crave – that these two men are the opposing poles of the genre's artistic spectrum (see fig. 2).

As a result of its association with Kelly and Astaire, the category of the Hollywood song-and-dance man has become inscribed within the larger paradigm of the integrated musical and its em-

³ The integrated musical can be understood as a film (most commonly from MGM) with "musical numbers that are 'integral' to the plot—either by revealing important character traits or by furthering the narrative itself" (Griffin 22). Integrated musicals are films that stress a tight, "natural" relationship between musical number and non-musical portions of the story (the opposite of a backstage musical, for example). Integrated musicals are not specific to film and have a long theatrical history. See Jerome Delamater's *Dance in the Hollywood Musical* (1988) and Dyer's "Entertainment and Utopia" chapter from *Only Entertainment* (2002) for more on this complex form.

² By no means exhaustive, some sources that use Kelly and Astaire to investigate the musical: *Structure: "Fred Astaire and the Integrated Musical"* by John Mueller (1984), "Narrative and Spectacle in the Hollywood Musical: Contrasting the Choreography of Busby Berkeley and Gene Kelly" by Lauren Pattullo (2007), and Jane Feuer's *The Hollywood Musical* (1978); Cultural/Political: "Feminizing' the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical" (1993) and "Dancing with Balls in the 1940s: Sissies, Sailors and the Camp Masculinity of Gene Kelly" (2004) both by Steven Cohan, as well as Brett Farmer's *Spectacular Passions: Cinema, Fantasy, Gay Male Spectatorship* (2000) and Beth Genné's essay "Freedom Incarnate: Jerome Robbins, Gene Kelly and The Dancing Sailor as an Icon of American Values in World War II" (2001); Aesthetic/Technological: Jerome Delamater's *Dance in the Hollywood Musical* (1988); Social significance: Leo Braudy's chapter on the musical in his book *The World in a Frame* (1976), as well as Thomas Schatz's section on the genre in his book *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (1981).

phasis on structural and romantic cohesion. In a 1976 interview, Kelly argued that to be a Hollywood song-and-dance man, “you need to sing, you need to dance, and you need to act – and you’ve got to be able to convince the audience that you’re the guy to get the girl in the end” (Lippman A20). In this statement, Kelly counter-intuitively presents a vision of the Hollywood song-and-dance man that he and Astaire helped to construct. He is not only a singer and a dancer, but also a presence that exists outside of a musical sequence as a romantic hero and a capable actor. Not only is he integral to the transition from non-musical scenes to dance breaks, but he is also a fundamental part of the film’s larger romantic structure.

In this idealized vision of the importance of the (white) dancer/choreographer leading man, what happens to other male musical performers who do not fit this exact definition? What about Ray Bolger who did not possess as much control behind-the-scenes as a choreographer? How do we situate James Cagney who, in his oscillation between the musical genre and the gangster film, is not as central as Kelly and Astaire? Finally, what about the Nicholas Brothers who were neither leading men nor white?

Fayard and Harold Nicholas, the “Nicholas Brothers,” embody

*4 A discussion of race and the musical deserves more attention than this space affords. The histories of tap and minstrelsy are completely intertwined with discussions of race and cultural appropriation. Even a concept like the “integrated musical,” which stresses cohesion and effacement of difference is weighted in relation to its larger context of segregated twentieth-century America. See Arthur Knight, *Disintegrating the Musical: Black Performance and American Musical Film* (2002) or Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (2010) for more lengthy discussions of American vernacular dance, the American film musical, and the racial, cultural, and social dimensions of each. For the purposes of this article, the Nicholas Brothers remind us of this history and highlight how the term has become entangled in problematic racial boundaries.*



Fig. 2. Kelly and Astaire’s Competitive Sparring-as-Choreography in “The Babbitt and the Bromide” (Ziegfeld Follies, 1946). Screenshot.

the antithesis of the traditional Hollywood song-and-dance man⁴, making them crucial to a revised discussion of the category’s historical prominence. Not only do they highlight how the concept has become whitewashed due to its association with Kelly and Astaire (which then excludes the complex history of American vernacular dance and its connections to racial and social formations and cultural appropriation), but they also remind us how the musical form itself prevented them from becoming “Hollywood song-and-dance men.” Like many other non-white performers, the Nicholas Brothers were constantly marked as different within the Hollywood musical genre. According to Dyer, “blackness is contained in the musical, ghettoized, stereotyped, trapped in the category of ‘only entertainment’” (Only Entertainment 39).

Excluding the few all-black musicals, African-American performers often played minor roles such as servants, slaves, or entertainers. Down Argentine Way (1940)

is exemplary of Fayard and Harold’s usual limited visibility as a cameo or “specialty act” within the musical genre. In the film, they are only an act in a nightclub that the white characters attend. These extractable numbers could easily be cut for Southern audiences, and contained the duo’s black bodies, cinematically controlling and subduing them while mirroring the segregated world outside the darkened movie theatre. Additionally, rather than ever being called “Hollywood song-and-dance men,” Fayard and Harold are most often identified as simply the “Nicholas Brothers,” a succinct shorthand that not only conflates them into one entity, but also signals a popular (black) entertainment act rather than individuated romantic heroes who sing, dance, and

5 In my research, the Nicholas Brothers are rarely even given the label “song-and-dance men.” Frequently, their work is described (by both twentieth-century Hollywood and contemporary film scholars) through terms that evoke vaudeville, such as an extractable “specialty act” or “eccentric dancers” (Stearns and Stearns 232, 282).

“get the girl.”⁵

This position of cinematic marginality directly opposes a more utopian vision of white freedom. As Dyer argues, “musicals typically show us space entirely occupied by white people, dancing wherever they want, singing as loudly or intimately as they need” (Only Entertainment 40). For instance, in “I Like Myself” from *It’s Always Fair Weather* (1955), Kelly’s Ted presents himself as a self-conscious spectacle in public, attracting crowds and stopping traffic. In *Royal Wedding* (1951), Astaire’s Tom occupies the entire space of his room, singing and dancing on the ceiling because he is in love. Unlike the Nicholas Brothers’ contained cameos, Kelly and Astaire not only play identifiable characters, but also possess a wide mastery over the space of their performances, as they are able to creatively sing and dance in parks, streets, cafes, and animated dreamworlds, to name just a few of the locations where the white musical presence is felt.

To broaden the associations of the Hollywood song-and-dance man to include marginalized and oft-forgotten performers like the Nicholas Brothers, it becomes important to privilege the extractable specialty act over the integrated musical for a change. This is where “The Babbitt and the Bromide” and its difference from Kelly and Astaire’s usual work proves useful. In fact, “The Babbitt and the Bromide” is similar to the Nicholas Brothers’ extractable routines and does not correspond to Kelly’s discussion of the Hollywood-song-and-dance man as a character who “gets the girl.” Rather than trying to make the Nicholas Brothers match the vision of the Hollywood song-and-dance man as leading man, we can relate Kelly and Astaire’s performances in “The Babbitt and the Bromide” to the specialty number. This celebration of the “extractable” sequence invites us

to think about the current ways many viewers consume musical numbers today – namely through YouTube, where song-and-dance clips from musical films, rather than the non-musical scenes, are most common. This reorients our attention from broader discussions of integration, character, and narrative (all key to understanding Kelly and Astaire) to a focus on the Hollywood song-and-dance man in terms of a performative presence (content) that encompasses both the (black) specialty act and the (white) integrated musical.

Reconsidering the Hollywood Song-and-Dance Man

In its presentation of seemingly endless clips of musical numbers ripe for instantaneous comparison, YouTube democratizes the concept of the Hollywood song-and-dance man. We can find a clip of the Nicholas Brothers, followed by a clip of Kelly, then Gower Champion, then the Berry Brothers, and then Astaire. That it is mostly the musical numbers that get uploaded to YouTube allows us to extend the concept of the Hollywood song-and-dance man by focusing on these skilled moments of spectacle. As a result, we can think about the Hollywood song-and-dance man as a cinematic visual and aural presence, which allows us to concentrate on a physicality

and a corporeality that is shared by Kelly, Astaire, the Nicholas Brothers, and other male musical stars. It is the expressive presence of all of these men that is not only definitive of the genre, but also expected by audiences and a natural part of their identities as Hollywood performers and, in the case of the white dancers, characters (Chumo 46). Thus, in stressing the Hollywood song-and-dance man’s compulsory spectacular energy, we can situate the figure as an action performer, defined not by his narrative location, appearance, or status as a character, but, instead, by his very skilled presence in motion.⁶

From the perspective of contemporary dance studies, this emphasis on these equal bodies in action has underdeveloped potential. For example, dance scholarship stresses the body in motion as a text, something that can both unconsciously and consciously reconfirm, resist, and transform larger political and cultural formations (McLean 2002). This is not to say that meanings pre-exist or that there is a direct relationship between a dancer’s intention and the spectator’s interpretation. It merely points to a similar way to study all of these men. For example, watching “The Worry Song” from *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) on YouTube immediately followed by the clip of “The Pirate Ballet” from *The Pirate* (1948) gives us an instantaneous comparison of two ways that Kelly’s hyper-masculine body and athletic style perform and challenge discourses of gender. Similarly, after watching “Jumpin’ Jive,” “Down Argentine Way,” and “Chattanooga Choo Choo” in quick succession on YouTube, we can interpret the Nicholas Brothers’ elastic and expansive bodies and style as a reaction to their containment – both cinematically and socially – as African-American performers in the twentieth century. That is, the arrangement of their bod-

⁶ While this essay only looks at film clips on YouTube, an important parallel discussion involves user-generated content. For example, video mash-ups, like Nerd Fest UK’s 2015 “Uptown Funk” video, where various classic musical numbers are edited together against a new soundtrack, similarly democratizes all of the performers included in it. By using a single song like “Uptown Funk,” this video emphasizes the centrality of the musical sequence (and the dancer within it) and presents all of the stars – from the Nicholas Brothers to Rita Hayworth – as equally skilled dancers, regardless of gender, race, or narrative placement. As a side note, this video mash-up reproduces Kelly and Astaire’s guiding presence in the genre by concluding with clips of the two stars shaking hands at the end of “The Babbitt and the Bromide” and *That’s Entertainment, Part II* (1976).



Fig. 3. The Expansive Style of the Nicholas Brothers in “Chattanooga Choo Choo” (Sun Valley Serenade, 1941). Jerome Robbins Dance Division, The New York Public Library. “Nicholas Brothers” The New York Public Library Digital Collections. 1941.

<http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/866a1b8d-0ede-da02-e040-e00a18061699>

ies, from their leaps and no-hand splits to the way that their arms never hang limply at their sides, is always one of outward propulsion, even as they stay trapped in their cameo space (see fig. 3).

YouTube is not the only way to view and analyze these different numbers and performances. However, in its accessibility, it allows us to move quickly between different films and sequences, inviting this close textual reading and appreciation of these skilled moments of visual and aural spectacle. Of course, YouTube should not be thought of as a permanent moving image archive, as its clips – many uploaded with low-resolution (Lundemo 317) – are transient, and can disappear at any moment due to copyright or other issues. YouTube may present an illusion of completeness (Lundemo 316), but not everything is uploaded and accounted for – one can assume that more musical numbers featuring Kelly and Astaire are put online than other, lesser-known performers. Additionally, in only uploading

and circulating the musical numbers from these films, we do lose the larger narrative context for the sequence.

YouTube should never replace watching a full musical. Rather, its alternative mode of viewing should co-exist with a more traditional theatrical movie-going experience. However, in de-emphasizing the importance of the surrounding story, YouTube encourages us to study the musical number – and the performer within it – more closely as a stand-alone phenomenon. It presents a space where dance, music, film, and performance studies converge. We can trace commonalities and differences between these male performers in terms of style and choreography, building new understandings of the Hollywood song-and-dance man based on individual technique as well as shared characteristics. We can ask questions about how these men work with a partner and how each performing body necessitates the transition from talking to singing and walking to

dancing. Finding non-canonical performances and lesser-known dancers gives us new examples to use in our scholarship and highlights the different ways, beyond Kelly and Astaire, to approach the male musical star.

Beyond the “Commonsense, ‘Obvious’ Idea”

The alternative mode of scholarship and analysis that the YouTube viewing experience necessitates demands a reevaluation of the Hollywood song-and-dance man. What does it mean to be a visual and aural expressive presence at a specific time and within a particular genre? For one thing, we must follow Dyer’s model and begin to investigate the more complex elements of these on-screen skilled bodies – be they a Kelly, an Astaire, or a Nicholas – and their historical, social, cultural, and aesthetic dimensions. In all of these discussions, we can see the emphasis on the body has always been there, just hiding behind the term’s misleading simplicity.

For example, as far back as the mid-1800s, the broader term, “song-and-dance man,” was used to describe minstrels and vaudevillians in newspaper ads about various shows (“Classified Ad 1” 1; “Jack’ Haverly Is Dead” 9), denoting a professional label within the American theatrical landscape that functioned as a signifier of a performer’s specific skill-set. What is being emphasized is the role of the body, as singing and dancing signifies a skilled and spectacular use of the performer’s corporeality as the instrument in producing capitalist

*7 Of course, there were many different types of performing bodies in nineteenth- and twentieth-century American entertainment. While I cannot fully investigate race in relation to vaudeville and minstrelsy, many sources – like Eric Lott’s *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (1993) – focus on this. For now, I simply want to break down a term like “song-and-dance man” and what it signifies broadly for all performing bodies.*

entertainment for an audience.⁷ This directly opposes a label like “variety performer,” for example, which foregrounds the novelty of the presentation – regardless of whether it is acrobatics, a song-and-dance act, or an animal routine.

The Hollywood song-and-dance man still bears traces of this theatrical history and its emphasis on the skilled body as entertainment. However, it also refers to and is an element of a specific moment in film history. The “Hollywood” portion signifies the studio system and the classical mode of production, with its emphasis on the star system as a means to generate spectacle. In this way, the Hollywood song-and-dance man, typified in the onscreen work of professional dancers such as Kelly, Astaire, Bolger, Donald O'Connor, and others, denotes the skilled use of a specific type of star's body. This body is a key element in the construction of a particular affective and aesthetic experience, communicating through commercially successful songs by Cole Porter and the Gershwins and executing choreography from popular dance trends like tap and ballroom. Today, these same popular formations link the Hollywood song-and-dance man to the studio era and the classical musical genre, situating him as a skilled body within a particular economic and cultural institution.

In his association with the studio system, the Hollywood-song-and-dance man is also inherently rooted in and shaped by the cinematic technology. He is, to use dance scholar Sherril Dodds' terminology, a “screen body,” as opposed to a “live body” (29). Not only does Dodds stress a sense of distortion as a three-dimensional body becomes a flattened two-dimensional one, but she proposes the idea of an added “skin,” as the live body is “unavoidably transformed when it becomes a ‘screen body’” (29). The screen

body is always produced and exists behind a mediated layer created out of external functions, equipment, and operations such as editing and camera movement. Even at his most basic level, the Hollywood song-and-dance man exists as a screen body due to the fact that the sounds produced by the tap-shoes – so clear in the final product – were often dubbed in by the performers during post-production (Clover 727; Hill 289). Thus, the Hollywood song-and-dance man is a technologically enhanced body and a different conceptual and aesthetic animal than his live counterpart.

Taking this a step further, the category of the Hollywood song-and-dance man is a screen body that is inherently connected to the musical by paralleling and reproducing a fundamental tension at the heart of the genre. The “paradox of the musical,” as Thomas Elsaesser labels it, is the tension between the effort and labor that goes into creating it and the finished product (86). Or as Jane Feuer articulates, “the musical, technically the most complex type of film produced in Hollywood, paradoxically has always been the genre that attempts to give the greatest illusion of spontaneity and effortlessness” (463). As a trained professional dancer, the Hollywood song-and-dance man reinforces this very effacement of effort, as it is his skilled dancing that supports the musical num-

8 It is important to note that Kelly and Astaire were both very interested in the relationship between dance and cinema. Kelly's animated numbers and Astaire's ceiling dance, for example, emphasize how they existed as screen bodies in dynamic ways. However, even though this certainly feeds into a vision of them as dancers/choreographers (and in Kelly's case, a director) with an important artistic and creative vision, it is necessary to remember that, at the most basic level, all Hollywood song-and-dance men are screen bodies by virtue of the fact that they are dealing with editing, camera movement, etc. Perhaps we should think about this cinematic layer in terms of a continuum—from Kelly and Astaire who had the means and opportunity to create these cinematic dances to the Nicholas Brothers, where editing choices and camera movement subtly enhanced their bodily capabilities as dancers onscreen.

ber's effortless aura. “The Babbitt and the Bromide” playfully comments on how Feuer's myth of effortless spontaneity actually masks an incredible amount of calculated labor, training, and knowledge of dance and film. Right before Kelly and Astaire begin the dance, the two stars joke about “whip[ping] something up right here on the spot,” only to admit that they have been rehearsing the number for two weeks. Similarly, in “What Chance Have I With Love?” from *Call Me Madam* (1953), O'Connor's drunken exploration of his surrounding environment seems to flow naturally without any pre-conceived planning. However, not only does it take an incredible amount of skill to act intoxicated, but when he finishes the number by popping balloons with his shoes, we realize just how much skill and rehearsal were required to make this number successful. Both of these examples highlight the musical's preoccupation with the tension between effort and effortlessness, as well as foreground the central role of the Hollywood song-and-dance man in this process.⁸

Finally, from the perspective of film scholarship, the Hollywood song-and-dance man implies a problematic entity that unsettles both traditional film theory and the cultural norms of twentieth-century America. In being a male, singing and dancing body on display – and the object of the spectator and the camera's gaze – the Hollywood song-and-dance man shares the same “show-stopping,” “to-be-looked-at-ness” that Laura Mulvey's famous objectified cinematic female possesses (Cohan 46-47). Film scholar Steven Cohan argues that the musical number makes “blatant spectacle of men,” their corporeal presence, and the various skills and talents associated with their bodies (46). Existing within this feminine position does not equal feminization or effeminacy, as Cohan argues these dancing

male bodies on display offer alternative visions of masculinity that revolve around grace, beauty, and exhibitionism (47). More importantly, this position is a space where the male performer can and wants to continually “insist upon his own ability to signify ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’” (47) long enough for the spectator’s look “[to turn] into a stare” (Mellencamp 10). It is his visibility before an audience that validates him as a professional performer. Just think of the many numbers, from Bolger in *Harvey Girls* (1946) to the Berry Brothers in *Lady Be Good* (1941), where the male performer is dancing for an audience in the film and seems to delight in the fact that all eyes are on him.

“The Babbitt and the Bromide” comments on the Hollywood song-and-dance man’s position of so-called “feminine spectacle.” In the prologue, Astaire pretends that he does not recognize Kelly. Kelly asks if Astaire has seen *Cover Girl* (1944). When Astaire admits that he has, Kelly asks, “Well, who did all the dancing in that?” Impressed, Astaire asks, “You’re not Rita Hayworth?” Kelly laughs, responding bitterly with, “No, I’m not...Ginger.” By calling each other by their female partners’ names, the two performers draw attention to the cultural belief that dancing is the domain of the woman and that dancing men, with their highly visible and spectacular bodies, exist within this problematic territory according to both psychoanalytic film theory and the cultural norms of twentieth-century society.

While much more can be said about the Hollywood song-and-dance man, it is important to recognize the term’s complex position as a signifier of a particular type of body, star, and performance within a specific industry and genre. By reconsidering the cultural and cinematic dimensions of the Hollywood song-and-

dance man, we are reminded that there are nuanced ways to discuss even the simplest seeming of terms. Additionally, when we start to disentangle the category of the Hollywood-song-and-dance man from Kelly and Astaire’s powerful stardom, we see the dynamic nature of the term as other examples come to light. Using YouTube, we can revitalize this term by not only redefining it as a visual and aural expressive presence, but also by broadening the various ways we discuss it (as an action performer, for example). Obviously, YouTube is not the only answer, but it certainly is a step in a productive direc-

tion. As traditional film scholars, we should celebrate the fact that we can utilize a contemporary mode of media consumption that opens up the study of the classical musical form in new ways and, in its very structure and function, emphasizes and fosters a more complex understanding of one of the basic building blocks of the genre.

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Whither "Bollywood"?



Articulating Bollywood as a Network and Celebrity as the Industry's Global Node

Swapnil Rai

Lately, New York City buses are plastered with the face of Priyanka Chopra, one of Bollywood's biggest stars and the lead of American network ABC's FBI drama, *Quantico*. While her global success can be read as an individual success story, Chopra represents more than herself in the transnational space; her success both in

India and America has facilitated global industry synergies, like India's leading film distributor signing a deal with ABC to screen *Quantico* trailers.

Amir Khan, yet another Bollywood celebrity, has become a sensation in China. His most recent film, *PK* (Hirani, 2014) was among the top five foreign films at the Chinese box office. Like Priyanka, his popularity in China gestures to more than individual success. His celebrity has been leveraged for public diplomacy by the Indian state (Press Trust of India). Within Bollywood, celebrity is at the helm of global networks, whether anchored by the state or industry. A study of global Bollywood therefore warrants a closer look at the institutions and individual actors that constitute this complex industry, and how this agglomerate of ac-

tors and networks operates to enable its expansion.

Using Manuel Castell's theorization of network society, communication power, and ways in which power is constituted through networks, this paper argues that Bollywood is a network of a variety of nodes that include various individual and institutional actors (Castells). The three primary nodes in the Bollywood Network that work together to produce this complex system are the state, industry and celebrity. These nodes have historically been key to the globalization of Indian films. Of these predominant nodes, the celebrity node is most unique to Bollywood. Unlike other regions, Bollywood star is at the helm of all industrial and political networks. They are economically embedded in the indus-

try as stakeholders, and mired in political networks as politicians. While, in America, Reagan and Schwarzenegger’s forays into politics were considered anomalies, politics is a well-accepted second career for Bollywood celebrities. As such, celebrities in Bollywood function both as transnational bridges, with “switching power” that connect key institutional nodes within and outside Bollywood, thereby enabling its global presence, and as “network effects,” internally influencing networks’ function, and, by extension, Bollywood’s conception and image both domestically and internationally.

Within Castell’s theoretical frame, “switching power” is the ability to connect one network cluster to another, or rather interconnect a diverse range of networks. Switches thus become pivotal bridging nodes because they possess the ability to diversify and configure a network (Castells, 2004). “Network effect,” or positive network externality, on the other hand is a concept from economics that refers to the effect or influence a user of goods or services has on the others. In other words it defines the idea of celebrity users as trendsetting nodes within the Bollywood network. They influence and create a network effect. This paper articulates how the above concepts are integral to Bollywood’s globalization and documents the celebrity’s historical influence on the global flow of Indian cinema. The following sections highlight how celebrity interacts with other primary nodes, like the state and industry, and the mechanism through which this interaction enables Bollywood’s global presence and transnational appeal.

The Pre-Globalization Era (1950s-1960s): State, Industry, & Celebrity

In the early years after independence, the Indian film industry

was not supported by the state. It was a dubious mass attraction to be taxed and regulated (Vasudevan). However, cinema created a sense of nationhood and an integrated imagined community (Vasudevan; Ganti). However, it remained outside the purview of industries promoted by the government. Entertainment was not a necessity in a country dealing with a food crisis and over a million refugees (Ganti). Even so, India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru’s, vision of modernization, industrialization and self-sufficiency was taken up by the film industry.



India’s early post-independence films, according to prolific Bollywood filmmaker Yash Chopra, were heavily influenced by Nehru: “Nehru and his policies were always part of our subconsciousness. He used to say that big dams and industries are the temples of modern India. We had internalized his words” (Ghosh1). Nehru was, in many ways, the charismatic celebrity leader who inspired India’s film industry. He can arguably be positioned as a bridging node, that brought the state and industry nodes together. The films created during the first decade after independence aligned themselves with the “Nehruvian vision,” lauding the virtues of socialism, equality, and industrialized modernity.

Many of these films circulated through film festival circuits to communist and socialist countries like Russia, Turkey and Eastern Europe. Three notable films from

this period, Awara, Rahi, and Gunga Jumna, quite successfully propagated and represented the Nehru creed, becoming very popular in nations like the Soviet Union. As a statesman and diplomat, Nehru understood the potential of celebrity diplomacy and wanted to leverage the popularity of Bollywood stars to further diplomatic ties with the USSR. Raj Kapoor, Dev Anand, and Dilip Kumar, the lead actors from Awara, Rahi, and Gunga Jumna, respectively, the most popular films from the 1954 Indian film festival in Russia, became part of Nehru’s official delegation to the Soviet Union the following year. Nehru’s 1955 visit to Russia is considered a geo-political turning point for Indo-Soviet relationship when India’s allegiance clearly shifted away from America and towards the Soviet Union. The visit laid the foundation for India’s industrialization (Haider). Moscow offered New Delhi affordable loans and unconditionally backed India on Kashmir in International forums (Sanchez and Bruhwiler). Upon his return from the USSR Nehru reportedly called Raj Kapoor’s father Prithviraj and asked him who was the most popular Indian in the USSR. Prithviraj said it had to be Nehru to which Nehru responded that it was Raj Kapoor⁹ (Mohanty). Assisted by the soft power of Bollywood celebrities, Nehru was able to foster an era of lasting friendship between India and USSR. These three Bollywood stars, in addition to Nehru’s celebrity charisma, managed to create cultural and political bonhomie with the Soviet Union, gesturing to the political potential for Bollywood stars that continues even today.

Meanwhile, Raj Kapoor’s continued stardom in Russia encouraged film collaboration. As a popular celebrity among the Soviets, Kapoor had the wherewithal to enable film collaboration in later decades. His film, Mera

Naam Joker (Kapoor, 1970), was a co-production venture between him and Soveksportfil'm. Based on his personal connections and stardom, he was able to persuade the Soviet government to purchase and distribute his film in the USSR¹⁰ (Rajagopalan). In this instance, the state was supportive of Indian film exchange with the Soviet Union—however, it was Kapoor's celebrity that became the key node enabling industry collaboration. The “network effect” of the Kapoor initiative led to other collaborative ventures over the years with celebrities like Amitabh Bachchan and Mithun Chakravarty. Having experienced the influence of films and film stars, Nehru set up the Film Institute of India (now FTII) in 1960, with the overt aim to encourage art house cinema. It became the launching pad for many Bollywood personalities, thereby emerging as a key institution within the Bollywood network. However, the state's relationship with the mainstream industry remained distant.

Pre-Globalization Era: Later Years (1970s-1980s) — Criminal Economy Networks and Celebrity

The decades after Nehru were a time of political unrest, with the country placed under a state of emergency for almost two years, from 1975 to 1977. One of the biggest changes/challenges facing the industry in these decades was its involvement in mafia networks. In *End of the Millennium*, Castells explicates the global criminal economy as an organized network that has flexible connections to other international networks. In the case of Bollywood, the industry was struggling to find financiers in a sluggish economy. India's economy was growing at a rate of less than three percent a year, often mocked as the Hindu rate of growth 12 (Williamson). The mafia stepped in as financiers for

Bollywood films. Celebrity actors and directors were at the helm of those networks. Various accounts attest to the relationship between the mafia and celebrity in this period (Chopra).



“It was quite common for stars to openly flaunt their mafia connections. Some of the biggest names of Bollywood were regularly seen in the company of underworld figures at cricket matches and parties” (Srivastava 1). The criminal economy networks not only financed films, but they also established extortion networks to extract money from individual industry actors whose ventures were funded by other sources. Two important incidents exposed Bollywood's mafia networks: first, the Mumbai bomb blasts in 1993 and the involvement of Bollywood star Sanjay Dutt in the incident, and second, the murder of prominent Bollywood music producer Gulshan Kumar in 1997. The two incidents opened a Pandora's box of criminal economy networks and nodes all pointing to Bollywood's entanglement in illegal activity. The investigation of film financier, Bharat Shah, led to audio recordings that revealed close celebrity connections to mafia networks. Financing Bollywood films had become an active front for laundering black money. The state recognized the turmoil and accorded the film industry an official industry status on May 10th, 1998. Indian information and broadcasting minister, Sushma Swaraj, acknowledged that, “by according the status of industry, we have given pictures the much-needed eligibility to seek

funds from legitimate places” (The Hindu 1).

Apart from other motivations, celebrity involvement appears as an important factor that brought the criminal economy networks to the fore and necessitated eventual state intervention. The state recognition of cinema production as industry was an effort to thwart the informal criminal economy networks. The important point to underscore here is the way celebrity operates in the Bollywood network. In the earlier instance, celebrities like Raj Kapoor were able to influence diplomatic relations and create personal networks that enabled Hindi cinema's global flow. In the latter phase, celebrities like Khan and Dutt were able to negotiate and configure networks that enabled their association or disassociation with the criminal economy. In Shah Rukh Khan's biography, he alludes to his celebrity appeal that prevented the mafia from harming him despite his disinterest in being part of mafia-financed films. Dutt, on the other hand, became closely associated with the network and his high profile celebrity persona got the needed attention from the state to oust the mafia. It can be said that in both the early and later pre-globalization eras, the celebrity figure does emerge as a central node with the power to configure and reconfigure networks.

The Globalization Era (1990s—Present): Global Bollywood and Celebrity

Several factors changed for the industry in the early nineties. The Indian economy was liberalized and the state now allowed foreign direct investment in various industry sectors. For the Bollywood industry, this change did not just lead to state legitimacy—it enabled the possibility of a formal corporate structure and, most importantly, the financing of films/media projects through banks and

other institutional investors. The following years saw a different pattern emerging within the Bollywood network. Two important nodes emerged in the early 2000s that enabled a global Bollywood in this era: 1) international film award shows, like IIFA (International Indian Film Academy) awards and 2) the rise of globally networked organizations like Reliance Entertainment. The celebrity nodes, however, remained at the helm of these emergent networks and served to connect them together, making Indian films visible on global platforms. The IIFA awards were instituted in the year 2000, and the first awards show was held at the millennium dome in London. The symbolic significance of the dome as a statement of “optimism for the future” and its literal significance as Britain’s newest and largest enclosed space were important (Mitchell). IIFA was a statement by the Bollywood network that Indian Industry is ready and willing to expand globally. The event was attended by global celebrities, including Angelina Jolie, Thora Birch, and Jackie Chan. Amitabh Bachchan, one of Bollywood’s most popular stars, was the ambassador for IIFA. The first IIFA sought to represent a post-colonial iconic cultural and business moment for Indian films. The figure of Bachchan, his personhood as a globally popular star, was symbolic of Bollywood’s arrival on the world stage.

Bachchan also functioned as a positive network externality within the Bollywood network during this defining phase for the industry (Easley and Kleinberg). Immediately after the accordance of industry status, Bachchan was the first to incorporate a company. ABCL (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited) was set up as a diversified corporate conglomerate. The company portfolio included the essential film verticals in addition to event management, book publishing, music and so

forth. The Disney-style mammoth conglomerate that Bachchan envisioned is often touted as an idea ahead of its time. The failure of this corporate experiment, led by a key celebrity node, presented the industry with both an extensive corporate dream-vision and the pitfalls that such a venture often affords. In the years to follow, many family-led production houses corporatized, and other corporate entities outside Bollywood invested in the industry. Yash Raj Studios, led by Yash Chopra, Bachchan’s close friend, was one of the earliest production studios to adopt vertical integration and adopt a corporate model. Unlike ABCL, which spread itself thin with event management and



publishing under its aegis, Yash Raj focused on their core competency as a production studio and ventured only into related vertical functions. There were other corporate conglomerates, like Reliance (also closely associated with Bachchan), that appeared as key nodes in the industry. Their corporate strategy was “networked,” which meant that they acquired stakes in already established companies. This ensured expertise in core areas. In 2001, Bachchan re-launched his company as AB Corp, limiting its operations to its core areas of expertise: film production and distribution. The network effect of celebrity production and distribution houses was further intensified when Shah Rukh Khan set up his film production

entity Red Chillies Entertainment the following year. Today, Khan is Bollywood’s richest actor with a net worth of approximately USD 600 million (Sinha). His last film co-produced by Red Chillies collected USD 62 million worldwide (Ramachandran).

Khan, Bachchan’s successor as one of the most globally popular and successful Bollywood celebrities, functioned as a positive network externality for celebrity-owned film production houses. He started a new industry business model where the star ‘as commodity and labor’ (Dyer and McDonald) was being reconstituted and redefined. The celebrity in this instance, Khan, had the power to define the terms of his labor so that he benefitted directly. The celebrity node, therefore, merged seamlessly with industry. With Khan, most of his subsequent films and Television shows were produced in-house. As a positive network externality, this led to most other top Bollywood celebrities (actors and directors) to set up their independent production companies and produce their own films. Khan’s initiative is an instance where the celebrity and industry node come together and the celebrity figure, because of their charisma, influence, and network connections, creates a new industry business model. Khan further expanded his business enterprise by investing in the Indian Premier cricket league. His company, Red Chillies Entertainment, owns the Kolkata Knight Riders franchise in the Indian premier cricket league. This instance also anchored a new type of business model that incorporated both sports and films in this emergent cultural form of entertainment.

A business model originally inspired by European premier soccer leagues, the Indian premier league was set up as international, and included players from all cricket playing nations. With Bollywood stars as owners and anchors for

the league franchises, the networked model brought together two of India's most popular entertainment forms: films and cricket. As argued earlier, the celebrity figure possesses switching power to configure and reconfigure networks and functions as a positive network externality. This scenario is an evidence of the same effect where several Bollywood stars, including Shilpa Shetty and Preity Zinta, acquired franchises in the Indian Premier league. The network effect spread to other sports, and two franchises for Kabaddi (an indigenous Indian sport) and Kushti (wrestling) have been instituted with Bollywood stars owning teams and participating in this emerging business model for entertainment.

While the above instances speak to the centrality of the celebrity node and its overlapping interactions with the industry, celebrity has also been at the helm of political interaction where soft power becomes a key element for diplomacy. As evidenced in the case of Raj Kapoor and Russia in the pre-

globalization era, Aamir Khan has emerged as a key node in furthering diplomatic ties between India and China. India and China have had a tumultuous relationship since India's independence. India went to war with China in 1962 and there were not any cultural or film exchanges between the two countries. Aamir Khan's academy award nominated *Lagaan* was one of the first Indian films to be released in China. The next Bollywood film, starring Khan, made its way to China through the film festival circuit. The industry and celebrity nodes came together to release Khan's film, *3 Idiots* (Hirani, 2009), that had gained word-of-mouth publicity and was formally released in China in 2011. Khan's most recent venture, *PK* (Hirani, 2014), was among the top five foreign films at the Chinese box office 14 (Cain). Khan's popularity became an anchor for the state to leverage Khan's celebrity appeal for diplomacy. The Chinese promotion tour for *PK* was strategically timed just before Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's visit to China. Despite appearances at

forums like BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and promises of bilateral trade, China and India have a large trade deficit. Khan's celebrity appeal resulted in the decision to address the deficit through Bollywood 15 (DNA Webdesk). The expanded Chinese foreign film export quota will now include more Indian films. A public diplomacy endeavour, led by Khan, resulted in gains for the industry node as well as the state.

In the post-globalization era when the state is more aligned with the industry and the celebrity figure is closely intertwined and interchangeable with industry, the power of the celebrity node as a switching agent with the ability to configure new networks becomes evident. The Bollywood network may consist of multiple nodes; however, of all its components, the celebrity figure possesses the ability to anchor networks and reconfigure them to enable new flows for Indian cinema and media.

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VIFF



2015

Hilary Hulsey

***This** year's line-up for the Vancouver International Film Festival provided a rich selection to choose from in relation to our topic of stardom. Upon tabbing through the program, I was overwhelmed by the number of films featuring stars from the distant past such as the short film *Charlie* (Werner, Willard-Stepan, Fox 2015), that gave fresh insight to the famed silent film star, Charlie Chaplin, alongside the highly anticipated feature-length documentary *Ingrid Bergman: In Her Own Words* (Björkman 2015) detailing the stars' biography. Their stories retold and refashioned decades later proves stardom has a lasting effect and box-office draw on an international scale. In addition to the iconic stars reappearing, newcomers like the young Jacob Tremblay who played Jack in *Room* (Abrahamson 2015) and Saoirse Ronan in *Brooklyn* (Crowley 2015) entered into what the fictitious starlet Lina Lamont in *Singin' in the Rain* (Donen & Kelly 1952) describes as "the celestial firmament," where their fresh performances are nothing short of memorable. Of course, the range of material to review might have covered any one of the films featuring a seasoned veteran of the screen or an up-and-coming starlet from each of the 70 countries represented, but I was faced with the unfortunate task of narrowing my choices down to a handful of films. The following group of films featured performances steeped in star quality.*



The Lobster

The Lobster (Lanthimos, 2015) follows a middle-aged man, David (Colin Farrell), who checks into a hotel with a quirky requirement: to find love within the next 45 days or live the remainder of your life as an animal. David chooses a lobster because of the duration of their life, fertility, and also because he “like(s) the sea very much,” which is where the film receives its title. Through a satirical series of events, his character navigates the complications of new relationships (both romantic and platonic) and attempts to avoid the fate of this idyllic society that frowns upon and strives to omit singleness. Guests of the hotel are encouraged to hunt a secluded group of “loners” in the woods in order to extend their stay by a single day. The film takes a humorous turn when David escapes the hotel and joins the loners, only to find their rules and regulations are just as difficult to follow. Their sole purpose is survival and solitude. And, unlike the hotel, love is strictly forbidden. Naturally, David takes interest in a loner, played adeptly by Rachel Weisz, and the narrative confronts the obstacles of their survival for the remainder of the film.

Throughout the screening of *The Lobster*, I was reminded of the themes present in Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) that call into question the societal pressures placed upon individuals to find “true” romance. The dry, dark humour paired with the bland (and oftentimes dingy) colour palette proficiently depicted the uninteresting aspects of a culture caught up in regulating something as colourful and spontaneous as the concept of love. Though Joaquin Phoenix’s moustache in *Her* may have surpassed Farrell’s facial hair, I was deeply impressed with his performance as it is reminiscent of his excellence in the 2008 cult film *In Bruges*. For this role, Farrell appears to have gained weight and lost his iconic temper, but the comedic delivery and timing prove his undeniable talent and star quality. In addition to Farrell’s performance, the actress portraying “Nosebleed Woman,” Jessica Barden, stole the spotlight in several early scenes. I anticipate her star to rise into mainstream films in coming years. *The Lobster* won Prix du Jury at Cannes Film Festival in 2015 and was included in the VIFF Repeats series due to its popularity, which is, no doubt, due in part to its remarkable casting.

Into the Forest

Canadian filmmaker Patricia Rozema adds another captivating film featuring strong female leads to her filmography with *Into the Forest* (2015). Two sisters, Nell (Ellen Page) and Eva (Evan Rachel Wood) live with their father (Callum Keith Rennie) on the edge of the woods. After their house loses electricity, they

venture into town to retrieve goods and gasoline but soon discover the situation has become dire. Without electricity or access to technology, their family learns the necessary means for survival in an apocalyptic environment. At first, it seems they are merely inconvenienced; Nell is unable to use her stereo to practice dancing and Eva cannot utilize a computer system to study for school. The untimely death of their father in a woodcutting accident places the circumstances into perspective and the sisters learn to lean on one another for both strength and sanity when intimate relationships and intruders attempt to tear them apart. At the climax of the film, the sisters solidify their inherent need for one another as they abandon their home, with Nell's newborn baby in tow, and set out into the forest.



With Ellen Page's personal life constantly in the headlines, her role in this film certainly adds to the star quality of the film, overall. However, I found myself thoroughly impressed with Evan Rachel Wood. Her performance was nuanced and more powerful than I had ever seen in her career thus far. She handled a violent rape scene in a single take—according to Rozema in an interview at TIFF—along with a scene depicting childbirth in the span of one film with an emotionality that held the attention of the entire audience at the International Village, even when the temptation to look away was nearly unbearable. It is not my intention to spoil the film or its plot twists (and, truthfully, the atmosphere created by Rozema is more important than the narrative details), but I must commend Wood for her artistic vision and talent. Page, too, delivered a strong performance, but their chemistry together made this film unforgettable.

The Falling

As a mysterious and ethereal coming-of-age film, *The Falling* (Morely, 2015) addresses the pangs of loss, change, and emotional misunderstandings of youth. Set in 1960s Britain, two friends Lydia (Maisie Williams) and Abby (Florence Pugh) share a remarkable closeness and delight in rebellion. From the beginning of the narrative, however, it is apparent Abby's health is failing and she collapses at school and passes away. Her death instigates a wave of fainting spells, beginning with Lydia, and the rest of the students (and even a select few members of the school staff) follow in suit. The fainting spells have no medical grounding and the audience remains unaware of their validity: are the girls fainting in protest? Are they hysterical or simply immature? Nevertheless, the film addresses emotional complexities of moving beyond the illusions of childhood and through the threshold of puberty that inevitably blurs the lines of reality.



Without the talented starlet, Maisie Williams (*Game of Thrones*) at the fore of this feature, the film would not hold the same level of accomplishment. The fractured narrative structure paired with the unusual editing style (and breathtaking cinematography) require an actress capable of carrying the audience's attention to the final scenes and Williams does this skillfully. Her attention to the subtle nuances of emotion in her body language contribute to the enigmatic storyline; from the rigidity in her shoulders due to frustration with her mother, whose personality is lifeless, to the repeated rubbery fainting, Williams conveys a deep understanding of her character and the diegetic world in which she belongs.



Eadweard

A must-see for fanatics of film history, *Eadweard* (*Rideout*, 2015) tells the triumphs and downfalls of a genius obsessed with capturing motion. This psychological drama set in the 19th century details the life of Eadweard Muybridge, who is most often associated with photographing a horse at full gallop to settle an old bet. Deemed the “godfather of cinema,” Muybridge worked persistently on a number of subjects: nude men and women, the physically disabled, and animals. The film also focuses on his unusual personality, the conflicts of his marriage, and family life. At the film's unusual conclusion, Muybridge murders his wife's lover and undergoes a trial whereby he is the last American to receive acquittal for justifiable homicide.

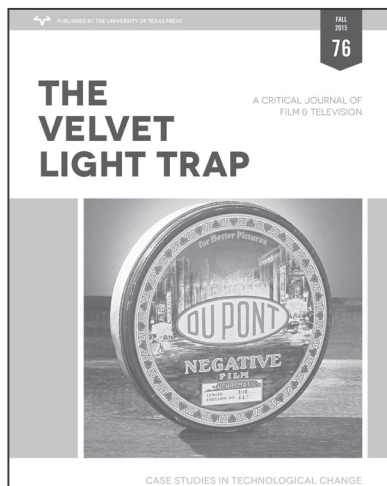
Anyone familiar with Vancouver and the surrounding area will appreciate the staggeringly beautiful cinematography of its landscapes and locations disguised cleverly within this story world. Additionally, Saskatchewan native Michael Eklund made his mark at VIFF this year for his roles in *Into the Forest* (Stan) and *Eadweard*. The diversity in both performances reveal his technical proficiency as an actor, but I am inclined to believe his leading role as Muybridge in *Eadweard* places his talents at star status. Since there is no documentation of Muybridge's tics or speech inflections, it was clear Eklund dove into understanding the all-consuming and obsessive aspects of his personality to give an accurate portrayal of the perplexing man.

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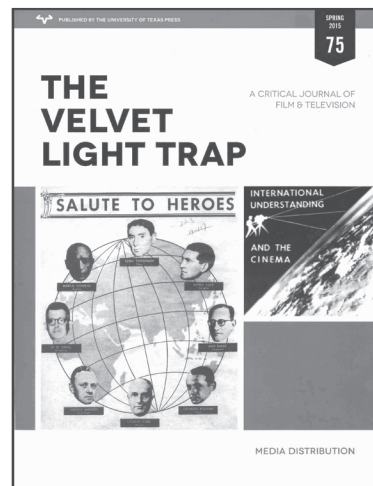
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