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COLLEGE COURSE FILE: STAR IMAGES, STAR PERFORMANCES

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College courses on directors, genres, national cinemas and television, and theoretical perspectives on film and TV have proliferated as screen studies has become an increasingly viable academic discipline. Of course, this growth has not been entirely systematic-indeed, anything but. Academic power structures, interdisciplinary rivalries, market pressures (in the form of course enrollments), and prejudices against the study of popular culture have all influenced screen pedagogy. This has resulted in some significant gaps in our teaching of film and TV. One such gap which has only recently begun to receive academic attention is the position of the actor, especially the star actor, in cinematic and television signification.

This lacuna has resulted historically from the following four components of screen studies: (1) the desire of film schools and early cinema theorists to establish the cinema as more than a mechanical reproduction of an actor's performance; (2) film studies' humanist predecessors; (3) television studies' debt to social science (4) the distance between academic teaching on film and television and journalistic criticism of them.

In the very first film school in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, students were taught that film did not merely record an actor's performance, that indeed, film technique could manipulate performance to create the director's meaning. The famous Kuleshov experiment, a talisman in film studies, illustrates how an "expressionless" actor could be made to express meaning if his image (Russian actor Mozhukhin's, in this case) was used as one component of a montage sequence. As Ken Kwapis (a director who went through the University of Southern California's graduate film program) observes, "Kuleshov's conclusion-that he could create emotions synthetically-gives film departments a rationale for treating actors like, well, cattle" ("Why Directors Fear Actors," *Premiere,* April 1989, 148). Small wonder that most filmmaking programs have only tangential contact with theater departments, which are busy teaching many of their students how to be actors.

But it is not just the film schools-which were, after all, few and far between in the 1920s and 1930s-that denigrated the work of the actor. Early theorists, such as Rudolf Arnheim were also concerned to prove how the film image differs from the reality it represents (e.g., human bodies giving a performance). Their motivation is clear enough. In order for the cinema to be certified as an independent *art form,* it must be capable of creating its own meanings, not just reproducing the meanings supposedly evident in real life or created in a theatrical performance. This presupposes that an art form is only such insofar as it differs from reality. And, in this instance, an actor's performance can be considered part of the "reality," for, indeed, it can capably exist in profilmic

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space, independent of the presence of the camera.

Following the lead of the early theorists, film history, criticism, and theory programs have also neglected the presence of an actor on screen, that is until very recently. Within academe, this stems largely from film studies' roots in literary criticism and distance from the teaching of performance. The conventional approach to literary narrative forms (influenced by New Criticism) stresses theme, narrative structure, and technique. But where is the literary equivalent of the actor's performance? There is none. The only equivalent that does exist is in the theater and, as noted above, film and theater departments have generally ignored one another. In any event, theater scholarship offers little of use in the study of performance semiotics because it is mainly concerned with teaching students how to perform, and only marginally interested in teaching them how to interpret performance. Consequently, the older disciplines of literature and theater offer film studies little guidance in the anaylsis of the actor's significance.

Has television studies fared any better in its treatment of the actor? Unfortunately, it has not. The typical academic television program either commodifies the actor as part of the business of broadcasting (e.g., teaching how "TV Qs" are determined), or concentrates on the pragmatics of television performance (e.g., how to dress in order to minimize the weight gain caused by the video camera), or charts the sociological effect of a star's image on the viewing public-if that effect can be quantified with a computer statistical package-without exploring the discourses surrounding that image. To my knowledge there are no courses in, say, the semiotic significance of Joan Collins. The empiricism of television studies has blocked it from an understanding of the position of the actor.

Students who are new to film and television studies may well be surprised by the discipline's inattention to the actor and the star. For, of course, actors and acting are what dominate non-academic writing on film and television, as well as viewers' discussions among themselves about movies and TV programs. The pleasures of the human body-speaking, moving, placed on display-are what *consciously* draw viewers to film and television, as much as genre does, and much more than editing, camera position, and lighting might (regardless of how these techniques operate to suture the viewer into the fiction).

I do not wish to advocate teaching a course on stars as if one were the host of *Entertainment Tonight,* but I do believe it is important for film and television teachers to account for the significance and signification of actors (both stars and non-stars) and acting. Star pedagogy need not be reduced to the ideologically overdetermined star biography and gossip that one reads in the popular press and sees on television. Rather, a course on stars should recognize popular biography and gossip as one important part of the star image-as part of what marks the star as ideologically significant. The basic axiom of the following course on stardom is, therefore, that the star is a *text:* a system of signs that are partly intentionally chosen by the star, partly chosen for him or her by his or her entourage, partly inscribed on the star by the commentary and criticism of popular critics, but always already shaped by ideological discourse.

The responsibility for the actual fabrication of a star by the actor and the people around him or her may be difficult or impossible to ascertain (who truly knows *why* John Wayne walked the way he did or Roseanne Barr sang "The Star Spangled Banner" off-key at a baseball game?), but we may still deconstruct star biographies, and interpret stars' relationships to specific roles, and posit meanings that stars represent. And further, we can teach

our students to distance themselves from the obsession with celebrity that popular media promulgates. We can teach them to "read" star texts and how star texts and stars function as semiotic and ideological systems. These are the objectives of the following course.

The course's structure-as well as its general philosophy-borrows from Richard Dyer's *Stars.* Dyer divides his book into three sections: (1) Stars as a Social Phenomenon ("[W]hy do stars signify . . . ?"); (2) Stars as Images ("[Wlhat do stars signify . . . ?"); and (3) Stars as Signs ("[H]ow do stars signify . . . ?") (10). The "why," "what," and "how" of star signification are our concerns also, although the course is not partitioned in quite the same fashion as Dyer's book. Part One, "The Star 'System': Economies, Audiences, and Spectators," addresses the historical birth of the cinema's star "system" and examines how that system is inscribed with ideology (or itself inscribes ideology) and how it functions with regard to the viewing subject. In other words, we examine the social and spectatorial "whys" of the star system. Part Two, "Star Texts," deals with both the "what" and the "how" of star signification. Stars, we presume, are a "structured polysemy," a systematic cluster of many meanings. As Richard Dyer observes:

> From the perspective of ideology, analyses of stars, as images existing in films and other media texts, stress their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempts so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced. *(Stars 3)*

What does the polysemy of a star contain? How is it constructed? These are questions posed in Part Two.

Part Three, "Star Performance," departs slightly from the stars per se to consider the more general phenomenon of screen performance. Obviously, all stars *perform* in some sense of the word, but, equally obviously, not all performers are stars. Most college performance courses in theater departments cover the nuts-and-bolts of how to construct a performance. Part Three, in contrast, probes how our understanding of performance determines much of our attitude toward a star. In sum, how do we understand acting?

Parts One through Three focus almost exclusively on the cinema star, slighting the television performer. The reasons for this are twofold: the cinema star system has a longer, more established history; and, as some have argued, the television star system might not even exist (television possesses "celebrities," but not "stars"). Part Four, "The Television Star System," confronts the dismissal of the television stars as *stars,* but it recognizes that the function of stars in the television apparatus is quite different from that in the cinematic apparatus.

"Star Images, Star Performances" has been designed with upper-level undergraduate film-and-television majors in mind. Other majors-theater, English, American Studies, and so on-might also profit from this material if their readings were supplemented with an introductory film studies text (e.g., Bordwell and Thompson's *Film Art;* Giannetti's *Understanding Movies).*

There is but one obvious voice for this course's textbook: Dyer's *Stars.* Initially published in 1979, this slender monograph and Dyer's work elsewhere have been largely responsible for the surge of academic interest in stars during the 1980s. (Dyer also has produced a study guide on stars, *The Stars,* as distinct from *Stars,* available from the BFI Education Dept., 21 Stephen St., London WlP 1PL.) Although pithy and densely packed with information, *Stars* is too short to serve as a comprehensive text and will need to be augmented with other assigned readings.

Currently, there are three anthologies in various stages of production which collect significant writings on stardom and could be used as a companion to *Stars:* Christine Gledhill, ed., *Guide to the Stars: A Reader,* in proposal stage; Carole Zucker, ed., *Making Visible the Invisible,* Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1990; and Jeremy G. Butler, ed., *Star Texts: Image and Performance in Film and Television,* Detroit: Wayne State UP, in press).

PART 1: THE STAR "SYSTEM": ECONOMIES, AUDIENCES, AND SPECTATORS

UNIT 1: THE EVOLUTION OF THE STAR SYSTEM: AN ECONOMIC NECESSITY?

Pre-classical film had no stars and no star system. (Background on cinema classicism can be glossed from *Film Art* or studied in considerable depth in Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson.) The "performers" in the Lumitre brothers' films of the 1890s were drawn from everyday life: passengers arriving on a train, workers leaving the Lumiere factory, a "real" baby being fed in an outdoor scene, and so on. The Georges Méliès films from the turn of the century often featured Méliès, but he seldom promoted himself as a star. Even the actors in the most famous film in the early history of narrative cinema, *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), are uncredited and generally unknown.

The anonymity of performers in "primitive" film may surprise students who, naturally, are accustomed to a cinema industry that is mostly star-driven. Stars, it must be stressed, are not an absolutely necessary component of the cinema, but, rather, are the result of the confluence of certain aesthetic, ideological, and economic factors. A history of early cinema illustrates how film (and, implicitly, television) could successfully exist devoid of

stars. Of course, classicism eventually came to rely upon the star system, but care must be taken to avoid turning this historical development into a teleology with the star system as the inevitable result (as is often done with the evolution of narrative in film). Discussing alternatives to a star-based cinema will help students better understand virtually starless screen genres such as the television soap opera.

How and when did the star system come to dominate the cinema economy? Until recently, film historians repeated the received wisdom that producer Carl Laemmle was the man responsible for first promoting stars. This standard history contends that early audiences began to recognize their favorite actors, even though they were uncredited, and to name them themselves. Laemmle identified the public's desire for stars and, around 1910, began successfully promoting the image of actor Florence Lawrence, who had already been dubbed "the Biograph Girl" by viewers. The independent producer Laemmle used Lawrence's popularity to combat the power of the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC), Thomas Edison's monopolistic attempt to control film production and exhibition. The rise of the star system, thus, is usually contextualized within the economic battle between the MPPC and the independent producers.

During the 1980s, however, historians Richard deCordova and Janet Staiger challenged this version of the star system genesis. Staiger maintains that Edison and the MPPC began promoting actors as early, or even before, Laemmle and the independents. She also notes that the inception of the fan magazines and the importation of the star system from the legitimate theater were two factors equal in importance to Laemmle's promotion of Lawrence. DeCordova has argued, in turn, that Lawrence and the first wave of identifiable actors were not true "stars," but, instead, were "picture personali-

ties." The latter were recognized across a range of films ("intertextually"), but only the former incorporated their publicly available private life into their persona. In other words, the "star" is known for his or her life outside of the characters he or she portrays, the "picture personality" is not. According to deCordova, the star system did not emerge until 1914, four or five years after Laemmle began promoting Lawrence.

These conflicting histories can be used as the grounding for a metahistorical discussion. Students should be encouraged to think about not just "who is right or wrong?" but rather to investigate how historical discourse is constructed. How, for example, does the Laemmle-versus-the-MPPC history fit into an ideologically determined narrative of the independent underdog combatting the monolithic organization? History, it should be emphasized, is not facts, but narrative, and discourses informed by ideologies.

Film texts for this unit are somewhat difficult to obtain, as is always the case with silent movies. I would recommend using one of Mary Pickford's early films (for their better-than-average availability and so that students can be referred to contemporary accounts of "Little Mary").

Readings:

deCordova, Richard. "The Emergence of the Star System in America." *Wide Angle 6.4 (1985):* 4-13.
Jacobs, Lewis. *The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History. New* York: Teachers College, 1968. 86-90.
Staiger, Janet. "Seeing Stars." *The Velvet Light Trap 20* (Summer 1983): 10-14.

Additional Readings:

Allen, Robert C., and Douglas Gomery. *Film History: Theory and Practice.* New York: Knopf, 1985.
Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode **of** Production to 1960. New* York: Columbia UP, 1985.
Mellencamp, Patricia, and Philip Rosen, eds. *Cinema Histories, Cinema Practices.* Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984.
White, Hayden. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe.* Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973.

UNIT 2: THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF STARS

We are often told by sociologists and sociological dilettantes, such as broadcast journalists (e.g., TV film critic Gene Siskel), that stars "reflect" the society of a particular era. This simplistic, cause-effect model of stars and their societies may initially spark students' interest in the social function of stars, but it may also do more harm than good if they then believe that the social position of stars has thereby been satisfactorily explained. An era does not cause its stars. Rather, its stars' polysemies are part of a society's discursive system; or, put another way, the (many) meanings associated with a star are part of the meaning system of that star's society, the *ideology* of that time and space.

Most U.S. undergraduates think of "ideology" solely as an isolable group of associated ideas: Republican ideology, Jewish ideology, Marxist ideology, Freudian ideology, and so on. In order to introduce them to the notion of ideology as a society's, or a class's unspoken, taken-for-granted system of beliefs and assumptions about the world-society's representation

of the world to its members-it is helpful to broach the subject of Marxist philosophy: The Marxist debate on ideology is, of course, a bottomless pit. Since this is a course on stars and not ideology itself, it would probably be counterproductive to have students read Marx and Engels's *The German Ideology* or Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," although both should be available for additional reading. Instead, Raymond Williams's *Keywords* could be used as a springboard into the topic, which may be augmented by secondary texts on the subject: e.g., Rosalind Coward and John Ellis's *Language and Materialism;* Terry Eagleton's *Marxism and Literary Criticism;* or the amusing *Marx for Beginners,* by Rius.

On a rudimentary level, students should be familiarized with Marxist vocabulary: "ideology," but also, "base," "superstructure, " "hegemony," "dialectics," "Ideological State Apparatuses," and the three major social classes of "aristocracy" "bourgeoisie," and "proletariat." I have found it necessary, in fact, to remind students that the bourgeoisie or "middle" class in Marxist terms consists of the industrialists and robber barons, the upper economic strata-the Reagans, Rockefellers, and Trumps-not the economically "average" North American living in the suburbs with a two-car garage and the appropriate number of children.

Dyer's work incorporates Marxist socio-semiotic analysis of stars. Indeed, his book, *Heavenly Bodies,* is subtitled "Film Stars and Society." His work in that volume on Marilyn Monroe, Paul Robeson, and Judy Garland could be addressed at this point in the course. I suggest, however, starting with a simpler approach to stars and ideology, like Charles Eckert's anaylsis of Shirley Temple. Eckert blends in Freudian notions of "condensation," "repression," and "displacement" (which may require some introduction) to explain the ideological function of Temple's image. During the Depression, Eckett argues, the potentially disruptive topics of work and money are repressed in Temple's films, and displaced into charity and love. His argument illustrates how stars function within an ideological discourse-that is, within the circulation of meanings in a society. Temple does not "reflect" 1930s values that have been threatened by economic hardship, but rather her image processes them-repressing, condensing, and displacing. Obviously, this is not the most sophisticated ideological argument, but it is one that students may assimilate fairly well. Moreover, it can lay the groundwork for further ideological studies and related topics such as feminist studies.

Screenings:

Bright Eyes (1934) or
Little Miss Maker (1934, not available on videotape) or
Other Temple film circa 1934-1936.

Readings:

Dyer, Richard. *Stars.* London: British Film Institute, 1979. Rep. 1986. Part One: "Stars as a Social Phenomenon." 6-37.

Eckert, Charles. "Shirley Temple and the House of Rockefeller." *Jump Cut: Hollywood, Politics, and Counter* Cinema. ed. Peter Steven. New York: Praeger, 1985. 35-51.

Additional   Readings:

Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)." *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.* Trans. Ben

Brewster. New York: Monthly Review, 1971. 127-86.

Coward, Rosalind, and John Ellis. *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject.* Boston: Routledge, 1977.

Dyer, Richard. *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society.* New York: St. Martin's, 1986.

Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism.* Berkeley: U of California P, 1976.

Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. *The German Ideology.* Ed. and Intro. C. J. Arthur. New York: International Publishers, 1970.

Rius . *Marx for Beginners.* Trans. Richard Appignanesi. New York: Pantheon, 1976.

Williams, Raymond. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society.* Rev. Ed. New York: Oxford UP, 1983. 153-57.

UNIT 3: FEMINISM AND THE STAR SYSTEM

Some of the earliest "serious" writing on stars came from feminist critics, who were interested in the reflection of patriarchal values in actresses which exemplified social stereotypes, and the breaking of those stereotypes by certain exceptional women. This "image-of-woman" approach predominated in feminist film studies during its formative years, the late 1960s and early 1970s. Subsequently, this style of writing about women stars has been criticized for at least two reasons: first, its naive understanding of how the cinema apparatus positions the female image and the female viewer, and second, its reliance upon the simple "reflection" theory of ideology. Since the mid-1970s academic feminist film analysis has disdained the image-of-woman approach. A sizable contingent of feminist film theorists shifted towards Lacanian psychoanalysis when, in 1975, *Screen* published Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema"-one of the most frequently cited and reprinted essays in contemporary film theory.

Mulvey's piece is used to segue into Unit 4, "Stars and the Theory of the Subject." But before addressing psychoanalytic feminist theory and the more global theory of the subject, a more pedestrian introduction to feminism may be in order. Students often react negatively to the phallocentrism of Freudian-based theories and the elusive/allusive vocabulary and grammar of Lacanian psychoanalysis and its derivative film theories. It may therefore be helpful to spend some time with the image-of-woman approach, bearing in mind its limitations and stimulating student distrust of it.

Unit 3 begins, therefore, with a general introduction to feminism, taking into account the students' prior knowledge of feminist issues. (Students may also be referred to summary texts, like Annette Kuhn's *Women's Pictures.)* As the unit evolves toward greater specificity, the feminist use of concepts such as "stereotyping" and women's roles is introduced. Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* illustrates this approach well, although it is slightly clouded by her barely concealed auteurism. (Alternatively, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* could be used.) Haskell's chapter on the 1950s (and early 1960s), and especially the section on Doris Day, deals with an era distant enough from today's student's experience that the films she discusses are usefully defamiliarized. That is, when students view *On Moonlight Bay* (1951) or *Lover Come Back* (1961) the ideology is strange enough to them that they can laugh at or deconstruct it, and yet, certain values of these films remain in contemporary mores, allowing viewers of today to connect with it on some level. Doris Day, in particular, is a pedagogically useful figure because her dismissal by most critics and many viewers has been contradicted by current feminist writers such as Haskell, who have attempted to recuperate her image by

reading it "against the grain." Thus, Day's image is a small battlefield upon which a feminist conflict has been mounted. One side argues that her image embodies a contradictory sexuality and a tough, resolute spunkiness. Her films provide the opportunity to begin questioning the manifest meanings associated with a star image. In doing so, students begin to defamiliarize personal and sexual politics.

Screenings:

On Moonlight Bay (1951, not available on videotape)
Lover Come Back (1961, in CinemaScope)
Other Day movie romances.

Readings:

Clarke, Jane, and Diana Simmonds, eds. ***Move Over Misconceptions: Doris Day Reappraised.*** London: British Film Institute, 1980.
Haskell, Molly. "The Fifties." ***From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies.*** 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. 231-77.

Additional Readings:

Kuhn, Annette. ***Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema.*** Boston: Routledge, 1982. Chaps. l-2.
Rosen, Marjorie. ***Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream. New*** York: Coward, 1973.

UNIT 4: STARS AND THE THEORY OF THE SUBJECT

It would seem self-evident that the relationship of the spectator-subject to the star is grounded in some form of visual desire, of pleasure in the image. We look at stars because we desire to do so; nobody forces or coerces us to watch Tom Cruise or Michelle Pfeiffer. This unit explores the territory of that desire, as it has been charted by psychoanalytic film theory. Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" must serve as the starting point for a psychoanalytic consideration of screen stardom. Even though Mulvey is less concerned with film stardom per se than with the apparatus by which visual pleasure is orchestrated, her analysis does offer some specific thoughts on the star image of Marlene Dietrich and helps clarify (from a feminist, psychoanalytic perspective, at least) the star-spectator relationship. (Students may need some tutoring in Lacanian vocabulary. One excellent introduction to the topic is Kaja Silverman's ***The Subject of Semiotics.*** Kuhn also provides a strong summary of the issues.)

Mulvey maintains that there are two contradictory aspects of visual pleasure in classical cinema: "The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" (10). Scopophilia, or voyeurism, is argued to be the key to understanding the representation of women in film. In this scenario, the viewing subject is specifically male and the viewed object is specifically female. The man looks actively; the woman, passive, is looked at. The woman connotes "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey's rather awkward phrase), but she also threatens to signify castration anxiety which, according to Lacan, is the foundation upon which all signification/language is constructed. The Oedipal Complex and its attendant castration anxiety enables the subject to enter the Symbolic, the realm of language. The classical cinema deals with the threatening object, the woman, by either investigating and demystifying the woman, or turning her

into a safe "fetish object." By catering to the pleasure of the male spectator-subject, the classical cinema exists as "an illusion cut to the measure of desire" (17).

Mulvey's argument is best illuminated with a Dietrich film. *Blonde Venus* (1932) is most helpful in this regard because of its overt representation of voyeurism and sexuality, albeit ambivalent sexuality. Dietrich plays a performer in this film, but even when she is offstage she is on display for scopophilic men (for example, when her husband and his friends first view her, she is bathing nude in an outdoor lake). Dietrich's sexuality is linked with animal-istic urges in the "Hot Voodoo" number, where she is dressed in a fetishistic gorilla outfit, and later, her sexual ambivalence is underscored when she appears in a man's suit to sing in a nightclub. Does this am-bivalence undercut the phallocentrism of Lacan as applied by Mulvey? Students may be pressed to deal with issues such as this.

Mulvey's piece on masculine visual plea-sure has been criticized for ignoring the women in the audience. This course may investigate the issue of the female specta-tor by pursuing Mulvey's own reworking of her original argument in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cin-ema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*"; or, more profitably, I believe, the course may incorporate Miriam Hansen's "Pleasure, Ambivalence, Identification: Valentino and Female Spectatorship." The latter article more directly copes with the issue of stardom in its analysis of Rudolph Val-entino and his image and its psycho-sexual implications for the female spectator. *The Son* of *the Sheik,* Valentino's final film, may be considered for its representation of what Hansen terms "an ideal of erotic reciprocity" (23) between male and female subjects.

Screenings:

Blonde Venus (1932)
The Son of the Sheik (1926)

Readings:

Hansen, Miriam. "Pleasure, Ambiva-lence, Identification: Valentino and Fe-male Spectatorship." *Cinema Journal* 25.4 (Summer 1986): 6-32.

Mulvey, Laura. "Afterthoughts on 'Visu-al Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' In-spired by *Duel in rhe Sun." Star Signs.* 55-61. London: British Film Institute, 1982. (Rep. in *Feminism and Film The-ory.* Ed. Constance Penley. New York: Routledge, 1988.)

———— "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen* 16.3 (Autumn 1975): 6-18 (Rep. in several anthologies, but most recently printed with Mulvey's "Afterthoughts" in Penley).

Additional Readings:

Kaplan, E. Ann. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera.* New York: Meth-uen, 1983. Intro. and Chap. 1.

Kuhn. Chaps. 3-6.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Subject of Semiot-ics.* New York: Oxford UP, 1983.

PART 2: STAR TEXTS

UNIT 5: STARS AS IMAGES: STRUCTURED POLYSEMIES

Units 5 and 6 deal with closely related, occasionally overlapping topics: the star image and the workings of that image in film texts. I have followed Dyer's *Stars* in this regard, but the teacher may want to combine Units 5 and 6 under the more

general heading of "Star Semiotics." Dyer's aforementioned phrase, "structured polysemy," is quite useful in the teaching of stars. It suggests that any particular star's image is constituted of many meanings, some- of which may even be contradictory, but that within a specific ideological moment a star's image is not infinitely meaningful. There are some limits and a certain structure to the meanings that are foregrounded in a star's image, just as certain aspects are ignored or repressed. Some elements reinforce one another while others contradict. Further, stars often occupy a privileged position vis-a-vis a broader, ideological meaning, sometimes uniting antithetical terms into a strange, powerful synthesis. Marilyn Monroe, for example, signifies both innocence and naivete on the one hand, and sexual allure on the other. Her potent star presence unites two normally contradictory notions. One final point Dyer makes about star images is that they evolve and shift over time; stardom is a semiotic process, not a static entity.

In order to comprehend a star's image we must look to the various "media texts" that construct it. These texts, in Dyer's terms, include:

1. "Promotion'‘-material created as part of the star's, the agent's, or the studio's deliberate manufacture of the star's image: e.g., promotional posters, television advertisements, and press releases.

2. "Publicity'‘-publicly revealed material supposedly beyond the control of the star and his or her representatives: e.g., newspaper and magazine articles about the star's indiscretions, television coverage of celebrity trials.

3. "Films'‘-the roles the star plays in films.

4. "Criticism and Commentaries"-critical reviews of the star's work.

A star's polysemy infuses and is constructed by these texts. From them we develop an image of the star. This "image" should not be confused with the actual person. "Jimmy Stewart," the star image, draws its sustenance from Jimmy Stewart, the human being, but the two are not identical. And, of course, the "real" Stewart cannot be experienced by the viewing public, who "knows" him only through a layer of media accretions. This does not prevent viewers from believing that they know a star's inner thoughts, but this belief is only part of the mysticism that surrounds stars.

Dyer provides a useful case study of a star image: Jane Fonda. Her polysemy, according to Dyer, incorporates associations with her father (Henry Fonda), supposedly liberating "eroticism" in her films with Roger Vadim (principally *Barbarella* [1968]), left-wing Vietnam War-era politics, feminism, acting aesthetics, and "tomboyism." Since Dyer wrote this piece (1979), Fonda's image has become more polysemic. Her exercise videotapes and the public revelation of her eating disorders have inflected the emphasis on her body in ways that illustrate the changing, temporal dimension of the star image. Class screenings include clips from these tapes and *Klute* (1971), a "serious" film inscribed with sexual discourse and representative of post-classical acting styles.

Screenings:

Klute (1971)
Jane Fonda's Workout

Readings:

Dyer. *Stars. 38-98.*

UNIT 6: STAR SEMIOTICS

Stardom and performance were largely ignored by semiotics until the late 1970s. As John 0. Thompson notes, "Performances seen ineffable, and thinking about them induces reverie rather than analysis" (55). Christian Metz and other cine-semioticians relegated the work of the actor to the same incomprehensible realm as the minutiae of mise-en-scene. Their early work tended to focus on narrative structure to the exclusion of performance and visual/aural style. Since then, of course, film semiotics has skittered off in the direction of psychoanalysis (considered in Unit 4), but there have also been attempts to apply semiotics to star images and star performance. This endeavor sees star images as star "texts," to which we return in Part 3.

Dyer provides this course with a starting point for understanding star texts, although he doesn't use that term. The segment of Stars titled "Stars as Signs" articulates character signification in film (how are characters signified?), and explains how star images are used in that construction of character. In his view, the star-character relationship operates in three ways: "selective use," "perfect fit," and "problematic fit."

In the first instance, the character makes selective use of elements of a star's polysemy. During the 1940s as James Damico points out, Ingrid Bergman's polysemy contained seemingly contradictory sexual meanings ("Ingrid from Lorraine to Stromboli: Analyzing the Public's Perception of a Star," *Journal of Popular Film* 4.1 (1975): 3-19). She was associated with a certain spiritual purity as well as an earthy sexuality. In her role as Joan of Arc (in 1948) her spirituality was "selected" while her practically sordid earthiness was disregarded. Later, when her sexual liaison with Roberto Rossellini became public knowledge, other more sexually ambiguous elements of her polysemy were se-

lected in roles such as Isabelle in Rossellini's *Voyage to Italy* (1953).

Dyer's perfect fit occurs when a star's polysemy closely matches the meanings associated with a character. He chooses the example of John Wayne to illustrate his point: "While most Wayne films simply use, and celebrate, his relaxed, masculine, Westerner/leader qualities, certain [films] have also brought in his awkwardness with women and his 'authoritarian self-sufficiency' (Leo Braudy): *Red River, Rio Bravo, The Searchers, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance"* (146). The problematic fit occurs when stars are cast against type (e.g., Bing Crosby in *The Country Girl* 119541) or other, less deliberate disjunctures between star and role are evident. This, according to Dyer, often has ideological significance as the star is called upon to reconcile tensions that have significance beyond the specific film role.

Dyer's argument provides a method for students to begin thinking about stars and their roles, but his work is less systematic than semiotics, the "science of signs," necessitates. Other authors have aspired toward this systematicity and their work needs to be included in this unit on star semiotics. Two such authors are John 0. Thompson and Barry King.

Thompson introduces the notion of the "commutation test" to the study of performance. This concept is borrowed from early Barthes, and although Thompson himself rejects commutation in a later article, students may find it a useful method for contrasting stars' polysemies. In the commutation test, one alters one component of a text's signifiers and then examines what effect that change has on its signifieds. What if, for example, the character/performance signifiers created for the role of Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone With the Wind* [1939]) by Vivian Leigh had been generated by Bette Davis? Or what if Cary Grant had played Ratso Rizzo (*Midnight Cowboy* [1969])? The shift in meaning that

these hypothetical recastings cause tells us something about the signifying power of those particular stars. This is particularly evident if the commutation test is grounded in actual recastings that students can compare and contrast. A film and its remake provide such an opportunity. Although a remake frequently makes changes that are too broad for the commutation test, one can usually find individual scenes that are repeated verbatim and can be used to highlight the differences between two actors. Claudette Colbert and Lana Turner in the 1934 and 1959 versions of *Imitation* of Life, for example, offer scenes of sharp contrast.

The final component of a unit on star semiotics surveys 1980s work by authors associated with *Screen* and the British Film Institute. Most notable is Barry King's "cultural materialist" (his term, after Raymond Williams) approach to performance and stardom. For King, the star text catalyzes certain "discursive resources" (meaning-generating phenomena) relevant to the cinema: "the cultural economy of the human body as a sign; the economy of signification in film; and the economy of the labour market for actors" (27). Each of these "economies" governs the production of meaning by star-actors. King, significantly, does not limit himself to the discursive strategies of the film text, but also explores the influence of "practical" matters (such as the availability of work for actors) upon the meanings associated with stardom.

There are many options for film screenings for this unit. If one does not choose to use a film and its remake, then just about any film with a recognizable, polysemic star will do. It is helpful, however, to use stars from the classical era. The polysemy of current stars is often invisible to students, just as our own era's ideology is. Thus, it is easier for students to analyze John Wayne than Mel Gibson; the latter's polysemy seems "natural," as if he were just a "real" person, while the former's is easier

to comprehend as a cultural and ideological phenomenon. If one were to pick Wayne, I would recommend showing She *Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), because Wayne plays a character several years older than himself at the time and certain aspects of the role suggest a problematic fit between Wayne and Nathan Brittles. The film also raises questions of the star-director relationship since Wayne made many films with John Ford and thus is heavily dependent upon Ford for his star image.

Screening:

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon (1949)

Readings:

Dyer. *Stars.* 99-149.
King, Barry. "Articulating Stardom." *Screen* 26.5 (Sept.-Oct. 1985): 27-50.
Thompson, John 0. "Screen Acting and the Commutation Test." *Screen* 19.2 (Summer 1978): 55-69.

Additional Readings:

Thompson, John 0. "Beyond Commutation." *Screen 26.5* (Sept.-Oct. 1985): **64-76.**

PART 3: STAR PERFORMANCE

UNIT 7: NATURALISM

All stars in film and most stars on television are actors-except, for example, television news celebrities, who "act"/perform in a slightly different sense. Thus, the work that film and TV stars produce is acting, a performance text. Consequently,

much of our understanding of stars and how they signify depends upon cultural assumptions about acting and the genesis of a performance. Naturalism dominates classical film acting and is the topic of this unit, but there is also an anti-naturalist impulse that will be explained in Unit 8. The naturalist actor strives to create a character that the viewer will consider "natural," believable, a character who fits within the bounds of credible human behavior and does not reveal the actor's work (in conjunction with the screenwriter and the director) in producing that behavior. Within this aesthetic, the more believable the character the better the actor has done his or her job. There are several ways to achieve this naturalism, but within popular consciousness the only acting technique that bears a name, and is thus differentiated from other acting techniques, is Method acting.

Historically, the Method may be traced back to 1897, when the Moscow Art Theater opened and Constantin Stanislavski began propounding his acting aesthetic. Romanticism blended with the emerging Freudian theories of the subconscious in Stanislavski's teachings. Nineteenth-century acting techniques had stressed pantomime and so-called mechanical acting, in which the actor "mechanically" assembles gestural and vocal traits, and thereby signifies a character. A good actor in nineteenth-century terms was one who could skillfully fabricate a role, much as a potter might shape a vase. Stanislavski countered that the actor must *organically* (hence, the tie with romanticism) merge with the role, selecting emotions from his or her subconscious and encouraging the part to *grow* within him or her. A character is not constructed, in this technique, it is *lived.*

In the United States, Stanislavski's technique, not yet known as "the Method," began affecting the world of legitimate theater as early as the St. Petersburg Players' North American tour of 1905, but it was not until the years following World War II that it made its strongest impact on the cinema and entered the popular vocabulary. (For more information, see Richard A. Blum, *American Film Acting: The Stanislavski Heritage,* Ann Arbor: UMI, 1984.) Lee Strasberg popularized the term, "the Method," and affected two generations of actors and directors through his association with the Group Theater in the 1930s and the Actors Studio in the 1950s and later. Popular discourse incorporated the concept in the 1950s on the strength of performances by Montgomery Clift, James Dean, and most importantly, Marlon Brando in his breakthrough films, *Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954) (both directed by Elia Kazan). This popular cultural assimilation of a watered-down Method was a phenomenon of the same post-World War II fascination with the hidden drives of the unconscious that fostered a vulgar interest in Freud.

Strasberg, following Stanislavski, advocates two techniques for achieving the union of character and actor: emotional (or affective) memory, and improvisation. The latter is used to contact the former. Once in contact with his or her emotional memories, the actor then melds with the role.

When teaching analysis of Method acting, students should be alerted to the signifiers of "improvisation" and "emotion intensity." Arhythmic hesitant speech, offbeat movements, stuttering, and awkward gestures, for example, are used by Method actors to connote improvisation, the aleatoric. Individual scenes from On *the Waterfront* which illuminate these performance signs include the well-known taxi cab sequence between Brando and Rod Steiger, and Brando and Eva Marie Saint's performances in the park on the swingset. The latter is scrutinized in Mark Nash and James Swinson's *Acting Tapes,* a videotape analysis of acting styles which

was originally broadcast on the British Channel 4 (described in Higson). More contemporary Method performances can be found in films featuring such actors as Dustin Hoffman, Sean Penn, Warren Beatty, Gena Rowlands, and Jane Fonda.

Screenings:

On the Waterfront (1954)
Acting Tapes

Readings:

Dyer. "Stars and Performance." *Stars.* 149-72.

Stanislavski, Constantin. "When Acting is an Art." *An Actor Prepares.* Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. Intro. John Gielgud. New York: Theatre Arts, 1948. 12-32.

Strasberg, Lee. *A Dream of Passion: The Development of the Method.* Boston: Little, 1987. 106-16.

Additional Readings:

Higson, Andrew. "Acting Taped-an Interview with Mark Nash and James Swinson." Screen 26.5 (Sept.-Oct. 1985): 2-25

Stanislavski, Constantin. *Building a Character.* Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts, 1949.

——— *Creating a Role.* Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts, 1961.

——— *My Life in Art.* Trans. J. J. Robbins. New York: Theater Arts, 1924, *1948.*

UNIT 8: ANTI-NATURALISM

Although very few stars perform outside of the naturalistic tradition, it is important to recognize that other options do exist. Students need to be shown that naturalism does not *define* acting, even if it does dominate performance on film and television. Studying alternative approaches to acting can undermine naturalism's hegemony and illustrate the constructed-ness of naturalism. One needs to get outside the taken-for-granted assumptions of naturalism in order to better understand its operation.

The early "debate" between Pudovkin and Kuleshov illuminates how naturalism can be undercut. Pudovkin was the first to advocate a naturalistic approach to acting in the cinema. Indeed, he was the first to publish a major work on film acting. His *Film Acting* echoes Stanislavski in its argument for the "deep 'absorption' by the actor of the image [role]." In other words, he maintains that the actor must organically merge with the role. Kuleshov counters this approach by demanding that the actor see his or her body as a biological machine which moves through a grid delimited by the frame of the camera. The actor does not *live* the role, according to Kuleshov, he or she simply creates gestural and expressive signifiers within the semiotic systems of the cinema.

Unfortunately, the Pudovkin-Kuleshov antimony is more evident in their writings than in their films, but it can still be instructive to screen works by both directors and press students to distinguish acting styles based only on the on-screen evidence. Does the acting in Pudovkin's *Mother* (1926), for example, differ from that of Kuleshov's *By the Law (1926)?* (To further confuse the issue, one might use Kuleshov's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* [1924], on which Pudovkin worked and in which Pudovkin performed.)

Even though Kuleshov dismisses Pudovkin's Stanislavskian approach to producing characters, he still argues for characters in which the viewer would believe and with- which he or she would empathize. Later, anti-naturalist authors would reject even this premise. Bertolt Brecht's "epic theater" ruptures many of the conventions of the Aristotelian theater, and among those confronted conventions is a naturalistic performance. Brecht argues that the actor should accost the viewer by breaking through the proscenium arch and revealing the *process* of acting, of fabricating a performance. The actor, he maintains, should present the character as if he or she were quoting it, as if he or she were one step removed from the character instead of living the character a la Stanislavski. This style of performance, according to Brecht, should result in the viewer being distanced from the character. Rather than identifying or empathizing with the character (as viewers of classical film are encouraged to do), the spectator is distanced and encouraged to critique the character's socio-economic position.

Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa Vie* (1962) remains the best application of Brecht to film. Godard directed this film soon after *Cahiers du Cinéma* dedicated an issue to Brecht and *Vivre sa Vie's* debt to Brecht is quite obvious. Among the many elements in the film that illustrate Brechtian principles, the most important to this course is Anna Karina's performance, which breaks down naturalist illusionism with direct looks at the camera and similar disruptive devices. At one point, Karina's character, Nana, views Carl Th. Dreyer's *The Passion ofJoan of Arc* (1928) and cries along with Marie Falconetti as Joan of Arc. The Dreyer film can be screened and its performance style, considered radical at the time, may be profitably compared and contrasted with *Vivre sa Vie.*

Screening:

Vivre sa Vie (1962)

Additional Screenings:

Mother (1926)
By the Law (1926)
The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks (1924)
The Passion ofJoan ofArc (1928)

Readings:

Brecht, Bertolt. "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting Which Produces an Alienation Effect." *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic.* Ed. and Trans. John Willett. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. 136-47.

Kuleshov, Lev. "Art of the Cinema." *Kuleshov on Film.* Ed. and trans. Ronald Levaco. Berkeley: U of California P, 1974. 41-123.

Pudovkin, V. I. "The Basic Contradiction of the Actor's Work." *Film Technique and Film Acting.* Trans. Ivor Montagu. Intro. Lewis Jacobs. New York: Bonanza, 1949. 22-30.

Additional Readings:

Assorted essays on acting in *Brecht on Theatre.*

Higson, Andrew. "Film Acting and Independent Cinema." *Screen 27.3-4* (May-Aug. 1986): 110-32.

MacCabe, Colin. *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980.

PART 4: THE TELEVISION STAR SYSTEM

UNIT 9: DO TELEVISION STARS EXIST?

John Ellis argues persuasively that stars do not exist on television in the same way

that they do in the cinema. This, of course, is contrary to common parlance in which television actors, even rather obscure ones, are regularly referred to as "stars." In his chapter, "Stars as Cinematic Phenomenon," he sets out the differences between the two media and thereby provides a useful segue from the study of cinema stars to that of television stars.

According to Ellis, the well-known television actor is a "personality" rather than a "star." The star is available to be viewed only rarely (perhaps in one film performance a year); the personality is available weekly or even daily and thus has no rarity value. The star is fundamental to a film's "narrative image" (Ellis's term for the enticing foreknowledge of a film's story created by advertising and publicity); the personality is sublimated to his or her character's presence (TV generally advertises characters in narrative situations rather than stars). The star's image is built up through a wealth of intertextual material and exists independent of the individual film; the personality has a weak intertextual presence and is largely limited to his or her image on a specific program. Stars embody a paradoxical combination of the ordinary and the extraordinary, the glamorous; personalities are fundamentally ordinary, familiar. And finally, the star depends upon Barthes's "photo effect," a "this is was" sense that Ellis argues, underpins the cinema; but television, with its direct address, lacks the photo effect, presenting itself instead as "this is is," and thus, does not possess the meaning of "present absence" that the cinema does. Without this sense of absence, of distance, the television performer cannot be a star in the same fashion as the cinema performer.

Ellis's argument helps explain the actor's presence in many television genres, but it fails to provide a global explanation of stardom on TV. His generalizations apply best to a genre such as daytime soap opera, where the actors are nearly anony-mous (their names are run just once a week and very quickly) and their intertextuality (their image outside of the program) is practically non-existent. However, weekly programs which are based on the appeal of a particular actor, such as **Magnum, P.I.** (1980-1988) and Tom Selleck, disprove many of Ellis's contentions. Selleck possesses an intertextual image independent of the program and has even appeared in films (which distinguishes him slightly from the bulk of television actors, even though this crossover is by no means an oddity). As film and television become less and less distinct, more actors are crossing the previously formidable line between television and film acting. Moreover, **Magnum P.I.** and most nighttime series (unlike daytime television) are still shot on film rather than videotape. It seems specious to argue that film seen in a theater has the photo effect, but seen on television it does not.

Denise Mann crystallizes many of the issues surrounding the film star and the television star, and the relationship between the two. Her article examines The **Martha Raye Show** (1955-1956) in terms of Raye's conflicted position as both a film star and a television star. Mann is also interested in how television used and absorbed cinema stars at a time when the two media were locked in competition for North America's attention. To do so, she customizes Walter Benjamin's notion of "aura" to apply to the significance associated with film and television stars. She also suggests, alluding to Jean Baudrillard, that television's incorporation of film stars on the decline reveals a postmodernist impulse, the creation of a mosaic of cultural icons who have come adrift from their original moorings in popular culture.

Screenings:

The Martha Raye Show (1955-1956), if available

A current soap opera episode

Readings:

Ellis, John. "Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon." *Visible Fictions: Cinema: Television:Video.* London: Routledge, 1982. 91-108.

Mann, Denise. "The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows." *Camera Obscura* 16 (Jan. 1988): 49-77.

Additional Readings:

Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings.* Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1988.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations.* Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. 217-51.

UNIT 10: THE CASE OF ROSEANNE BARR

Roseanne Barr provides a particularly fertile case study for interpreting the television star image and may be used to illustrate to students how a star's polysemic image may be broken down and analyzed. She possesses all of the qualifications for stardom that Ellis proposes, thus illustrating the need to apply notions of stardom to television. Chief among her star characteristics is her phenomenal intertextuality. She has appeared to dominate virtually every form of popular media: live performance (in comedy clubs), television (the hugely popular domestic comedy *Roseanne* [1988-], appearances on talk shows, and stand-up routines), theatrical films *(She Devil* [1989]), books *(Roseanne: My Life as a Woman* [1989]), and the press, both tabloid and mainstream. Indeed, her frequent presence in publications such as *The National Enquirer* has earned her the dubious title of "Queen of the Tabloids."

What is most interesting about Barr's presence is that her astonishingly quick rise to prominence is predicated upon her taboo-breaking, her "unruliness" as Kathleen Rowe has noted ("Roseanne as Unruly Woman," Society for Cinema Studies conference, 24 May 1990). In an era in which patriarchy is reasserting its strength, Barr ridicules the power of the man in the family and makes jokes about taboo subjects such as menstruation. At a time when the determinedly upscale Huxtable family *(The Cosby Show [* 1984-]) had returned the domestic comedy to the upper middle-class venue of 1950s programs, Barr's TV family is explicitly working-class. In her publicly available private life she has made a mockery of the cult of parenting; pregnant at the age of 19, she gave her baby up for adoption. Her physical size counters the U.S. obsession with thinness and would place her within the tradition of the sexually neutral "mammy" stereotype if it weren't for her blatant, "vulgar" sexuality. Even her religion is "wrong" for America. She was raised in an odd blend of Judaism and Mormonism.

And yet, Barr's image is not entirely an assault on dominant ideology. Despite the way her family has been represented in her publicly available private life, her presence in *Roseanne,* the TV program, reaffirms the primacy of the nuclear family. In a sense, she is still the mammy figure. Although sexually active with her husband and occasionally sarcastic with her children, unlike most mammies, she is still fundamentally loving and nurturing. The family is still represented as the cornerstone of U.S. life. In this fashion, the "dangerous" meanings associated with Roseanne Barr are neutralized. Her polysemy, like that of our most potent stars, brings together ideological conflicts into a

magical resolution that is certified by the very presence of the star.

At the time of this writing, Barr serves as the best example of a television star bringing together opposing ideological terms. In a year or two, she may fall from public consciousness and cease to be a viable synthesizer of ideological antimonies. However, students should still be encouraged to confront the ideological contradictions within a star's polysemy, recognizing that certain meanings are elected and others ignored as a result of aesthetic, economic, and social factors. In other words, the polysemy has a certain structure and is not limitless.

Episodes from *Roseanne* (1988-)

Readings:

Articles about Roseanne Barr in the tabloid press.

Barr, Roseanne. *Roseanne: My Life as a Woman.* New York: Harper, 1989.

——— "What Am I Anyway, a Zoo?" *New York Times 31* July 1989: A15 (Letter printed on the **OpEd**