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The star system in Europe

Martin Shingler

ABSTRACT

This essay provides a succinct consideration of some of the key constituents of what might be called 'European Star Studies.' Rather than a comprehensive survey of the academic literature on European stars and stardom originating across Europe, it is limited to a relatively small sample of influential studies published in English. Divided into three main sections –pre-*Stars*, *Stars* and post-*Stars*– the essay examines the following: European studies of stardom that pre-dated the publication of Richard Dyer's *Stars* in 1979; the key concepts and methods used by Dyer in *Stars*; and a range of star studies published in the twenty-first century by European film scholars, some of which have advanced Dyer's work while others have departed significantly from it in order to address a different set of topics and use alternative methodologies for exploring these. Even an examination limited to studies that have been published in English indicates that Star Studies has spread across many European nations, large and small, and that important work on film stars and stardom has been conducted, particularly since 2000. All of which has been instrumental in sustaining the vitality and diversity of this rich branch of film studies.

KEYWORDS

Star Studies, stars, stardom, Europe, European, internationalism, embodiment, transnational, transmediality.

Introduction

Star Studies is a thriving sub-disciplinary field within Film Studies, one that is chiefly concerned with the semiotic, cultural, economic, industrial, legal and historical aspects of stardom. Its roots, moreover, lie firmly in Europe. Indeed, many of the pioneering and most influential theorists associated with this branch of film scholarship were based in Europe; namely, Edgar Morin (France in the 1950s), Francesco Alberoni (Italy in the 1960s) and Richard Dyer (Britain in the 1970s and '80s). Before Film Studies became established as a major academic subject taught at universities worldwide, these scholars lay the foundations for what was to become one of the richest and most stimulating areas of film research. It is generally accepted that the publication in Britain of Richard Dyer's *Stars* in 1979 constituted the beginning of what is now known as Star Studies. The impact of this work has been far-reaching and since the 1980s studies of film stardom and individual stars have become the focus of considerable academic interest and activity, attracting a wide range of theoretical approaches and methodologies (SHINGLER, 2012: 8-36). Much of this activity in the 1980s and '90s was dominated by American scholars and publications, along with studies of Hollywood stars and stardom by British-based academics, such as Christine Gledhill, Jackie Stacey and Barry King.¹ However, since the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been an increasing amount of academic activity on European film stardom by academics based in Europe.

There is little scope to provide a comprehensive survey of the academic literature on European stars and stardom originating across Europe in this short essay. Consequently, what follows is a brief consideration of some of the key constituents of what might be called 'European Star Studies,' focused on a small sample of influential studies. This essay, furthermore, is divided up into three main sections, pre-*Stars*, *Stars* and post-*Stars*. These examine the following; European studies of stardom that pre-dated the publication of Dyer's *Stars* in 1979; the key concepts and methods used by Dyer in *Stars*; and a range of star studies published in the twenty-first century by European film scholars.

1. See Christine Gledhill's *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (1991), Jackie Stacey's *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (1994) and Barry King's 'The Star as the Commodity: Notes Towards a Performance Theory of Stardom' (1987).

1. Pre-Stars

That France has produced some of the biggest stars on the planet (Sarah Bernhardt, Brigitte Bardot and Gérard Depardieu) is not entirely surprising given that, as John Gaffney and Diana Holmes have written, 'France, perhaps more than other comparable countries, has a very strong tradition of personalisation in all aspects of social and political life' (GAFFNEY and HOLMES, 2007: 9). Moreover, as they go on to state, 'The dramatic expression of many social, political or cultural moments in the form of a person is a quintessentially French characteristic' (ibid.). With film stars playing a key role in the popular negotiation of various ideological contradictions resulting from the clash and co-existence of modernity and tradition in a turbulent post-war France, French academics became some of the first to study stardom (GAFFNEY and HOLMES, 2007: 8). Informed by anthropology as well as Marxist theory, Edgar Morin's *Les Stars* (1957) focused on how stars operate as myths within modern technological and urban societies, as quasi-religious beings that straddle 'both sacred and profane, divine and real, aesthetic and magic' (MORIN, 2005: 84).² Using the term 'superpersonality,' he highlighted the way that stars typically combine extraordinary qualities with ordinariness (MORIN, 2005: 38). Arguing that stars 'divinize themselves' both to attract publicity and to become more like their ideal self, Morin discussed how stars operate as 'patterns of culture' for their public, giving 'shape to the total human process that has produced them,' being role models for all kinds of people (MORIN, 2005: 147).

Edgar Morin was also one of the first academics to discuss the behaviour of fans and to use British, American and French fan mail and star-fan correspondence as part of his methodology. He was also one of the first to declare his own position as a fan rather than maintaining the usual critical distance between the analyst and the analysed (WERNER, 2007: 35). This may have damaged Morin's credibility and authority for some academics at the time and, indeed, as Susan Werner has observed, *Les Stars* made little impression on Film Studies until the 1990s, by which time the growth of Media and Cultural Studies had made Morin's work much more acceptable within the academy (WERNER, 2007: 27).

Francesco Alberoni's 1962 essay 'L'Élite irresponsable'

2. Edgar Morin's *Les Stars*, published originally in French in 1957, was translated into English by Richard Howard for the University of Minnesota Press in 2005.

proved more influential than Morin's book in the 1970s and '80s, partly due to being available in an English-language translation from 1972.³ It was here that stars were seen to fulfil a variety of socio-political functions in large-scale industrial and urbanized societies, such as distracting public scrutiny away from the power elite, such as government ministers, aristocracy, monarchy, religious leaders and business tycoons. Less interested in stars as role models than Morin, Alberoni concentrated on how stars become a focus for public debates about morality. For him, stars typically operate as an elite group in society but one that has no real power despite their wealth and fame. Meanwhile, in return for their elevated social status, stars are subjected to unprecedented levels of public attention and scrutiny, being 'members of the community whom all can evaluate, love or criticize' (ALBERONI, 1962/2006: 115). Evaluation notably takes a variety of forms, often concerned with issues of moral, social and sexual deviance.

Many of Alberoni's ideas were taken up and developed by other scholars; most notably, P. David Marshall in *Celebrity and Power* (1997). This has included the nature of star power and autonomy, media scrutiny of stars, the exposure and control of scandal and gossip, stars as symbols of morality (involving ideological contradictions being negotiated and resolved), the role of the audience in an individual's attainment and retention of star status and the significance of charisma. Many of these issues resonated through Richard Dyer's *Stars*, particularly the notion of the symbolic value of film stars. Yet Dyer also drew heavily on Morin's *Les Stars*. Among the many Morin-like or Morin-inspired themes of *Stars* is the importance of publicity and merchandizing, the prominence of the star's face and the importance of beauty and youth, the various levels of identification, and the distinctions between stars and the characters they play on-screen, as well as the different categories of stars (involving distinctions between stars and lead actors but also pin-ups and starlets).⁴

3. Francesco Alberoni's essay 'L'Élite irresponsable: théorie et recherche sociologique sur le *divismo*' was originally published in the journal *Ikon* in 1962 and was subsequently translated into English and reprinted under the title of 'The Powerless Elite: Theory and Sociological Research on the Phenomenon of Stars' in Denis McQuail's anthology *Sociology of Mass Communications* (1972) and, later, in P. David Marshall's edited collection *The Celebrity Culture Reader* (2006).

4. Once taken up by Richard Dyer, many of Morin's methods and themes were subsequently adopted by other scholars in Britain;

2 Stars

The single most important academic publication on film stardom was written by Richard Dyer and published by the British Film Institute in 1979. *Stars* not only brought together previous sociological and semiotic work on stars and stardom but also substantially laid the groundwork for a more wide-ranging debate on the subject, doing so in an accessible way. Emerging directly out of British Cultural Studies, this book approached stars not only as texts to be read (in terms of their films and their publicity) but also as social products with significant symbolic value and meaning; in other words, operating as social symbols. Indeed, the most fundamental concept underpinning *Stars* is ideology, stars being perceived as conveyers of social and cultural values, representing the views, attitudes and beliefs of a society (or even specific social groups) at particular historical moments. This, Dyer argued, involved a number of ideological contradictions given that many of the most successful and popular stars embody apparently contradictory meanings and/or attributes; such as, their ordinary and special qualities, their typicality and their uniqueness. One of Dyer's most important and influential ideas emerged directly from this; namely, that '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' (DYER, 1979: 3). In this regard, Dyer was less concerned to 'determine the correct meaning and affect' of particular stars than 'to determine what meanings and affects can legitimately be read in them' (ibid.).⁵

After setting out the social, institutional and economic conditions of stardom in the first part of his book, Dyer considered how stars operate as images, being made out of an array of 'media texts that can be grouped together as promotion, publicity, films and criticisms and commentaries' (DYER, 1979: 60). In so doing, he made analysis of extra-cinematic materials a critical part of the study of film stars, with analysis of

most notably Jackie Stacey who examined the responses of British female film fans to Hollywood's leading female stars of the 1940s and '50s in *Star Gazing* (1994). In so doing, she built substantially on Morin's earlier investigation into audience-star relations, identification and *fandom*.

5. Influenced by Cultural Studies, Dyer understood audiences and fans to be more active and empowered than Morin. While Morin and Dyer reveal a similar interest in audiences, Dyer places more emphasis in his work on the role of audiences (and different kinds of audiences) in making stars meaningful.

promotional, publicity and critical materials being as important for film scholars as textual analysis of films. Subsequently, the analysis of extra-cinematic materials became an increasingly important aspect of film scholarship more generally.⁶

It is in the later sections of *Stars* that Dyer advances many of Morin's themes, particularly about identification and the relationships pertaining between audiences and stars. Yet while Dyer's *Stars* was 'a survey of what has been done in the study of stars' and a refinement and advancement of this work, it also identified areas for future research (DYER, 1979: 160). This included more empirical work on audiences, particularly for the purposes of better understanding the use of mainstream stars by marginal groups, including working-class women, blacks and gays. This was something that Dyer later developed in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (1987), a book that proved inspirational for many film and cultural scholars, including myself.

Yet much of the work that emerged in the wake of Dyer's publications (like Dyer's and Morin's books) focused on Hollywood stars and stardom to the point that numerous scholars expressed concern about a Hollywood-bias at the start of the twenty-first century. In 2000, for instance, British-based French film scholar Ginette Vincendeau observed in the 'Preface' to her book *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* that most of the academic studies of stardom had been 'devoted overwhelmingly to Hollywood' (VINCENDEAU, 2000: vii). The following year, Bruce Babington noted in his introduction to *British Stars and Stardom* that 'dominant star theory, even when British in origin, was almost wholly Hollywood-oriented', reflecting 'Hollywood's unquestionable status as the paradigmatic site of stardom' (BABINGTON, 2001: 3). He also noted an underlying assumption that the characteristics of the Hollywood star system pertain equally in other national contexts. This was something that both Vincendeau's study of French film stardom and Babington's anthology on British stardom set out to challenge, as did several other publications that appeared around this time, as discussed in the following section.

3 Post-Stars

Ginette Vincendeau's *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*

was one of several publications in the early 2000s to extend the borderlines of Star Studies to include Europe. Here, Vincendeau's case study chapters on stars such as Jean Gabin, Brigitte Bardot, Catherine Deneuve and Gérard Depardieu, among others, established the importance of these stars within French cinema but also how different they have been, both from each other and, more importantly, from Hollywood stars. One of the most important contributions of Vincendeau's book was to delineate a European alternative to the Hollywood model of stardom, one that recognised the ways in which France's leading film actors have operated differently to their Hollywood counterparts, both within the film industry and the wider culture. So in France, for instance, film stars not only maintain closer links with theatre and engage in more artisanal modes of production than in America but also retain greater levels of autonomy and creative freedom. To illustrate this, Vincendeau observed that French stars are notoriously reluctant to engage in promotional tours and interviews for their films, some even criticising their own films, something that would be virtually unthinkable in Hollywood due to various clauses in the contractual arrangements between studios and stars. Noting that French stars are seldom tied to long-term contracts, Vincendeau stressed throughout her book the extent to which French star contracts typically grant studio's limited jurisdiction over a star's image and activities. In this and other ways, Vincendeau's socio-cultural study of stars and stardom in France throughout the twentieth century added significantly to Star Studies in general and set the trend for a more diverse range of national studies from around the world during the twenty-first century.

At the same time, *Heroines without Heroes: Reconstructing Female and National Identities in European Cinema, 1945-51*, edited by the British-based German film scholar Ulrike Sieglöhr, deployed Dyer's notion of stars as social embodiments to female stars of Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Spain. Comprising eleven essays on the films and images of major female stars from these five countries during a seven year period after the end of the Second World War, this book combined a commitment to feminist film theory with a Dyerian preoccupation with how female stars embody aspects of national femininity. This involved highlighting significant national differences, notably between Britain and 'the cinemas of defeated or politically compromised nations' such as Germany, Italy and France

6. The analysis of film reviews, criticisms and publicity materials became a primary feature of the New Film History from the mid-1980s, while scholars associated with Reception Studies, most notably Janet Staiger, drew heavily on these as a means for understanding what

films meant for audiences historically. See Staiger's *Interpreting Films* (1992) and Chapman, Glancy and Harper's *Introduction to The New Film History* (2007).

(SIEGLOHR, 2000: 10). Yet this book, while contributing significantly to the increasing internationalism of Star Studies, was still limited to five of the largest and most powerful Western European countries, as the editor herself acknowledged, with no representation in terms of Eastern Europe or Scandinavian countries (SIEGLOHR, 2000: 5).

Sieglohr's implicit call for greater national representation was taken up in 2003 when Stockholm hosted the fourth Popular European Cinema conference, entitled 'Methods and Stars.' This not only aimed to reclaim some forgotten or neglected stars of Europe but also to redress the Anglo-American bias of Film Studies. Twenty-two of the papers given at this event were subsequently developed into essays for *Stella Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema* (2009), edited by Tytti Soila. This anthology brought together one of the richest and most diverse collections of essays on European film stars to date, with stars included not only from Germany, Britain, Italy and France but also Norway, Sweden, Holland, Finland, Denmark, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium and Greece. Authors, meanwhile, were drawn from Belgium, Holland, Britain, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Italy and the USA.

Stella Encounters, as the book's editor declared in her introduction, set out to question the notion both of Hollywood as the originator of the star system and European cinemas as being essentially adaptors or imitators of that system. The distinctive qualities of Europe's various star systems examined by the book's authors reveal a multitude of stardoms and star practices. Yet the major issue here remained the relationship between stars and notions of nationhood.⁷ As Soila writes,

'In many European countries, then, the typical feature of a national cinema culture is the emergence of stars whose qualities were informed by what has been perceived as national characteristics. The stars either confirm them –embodying a number of alleged national qualities in a positive o[r] negative way– or deviate from them by embodying the "other" of a presumed national stereotype' (SOILA, 2009: 9).

Many of the contributors to Soila's book discuss stars in relation not just to national contexts but also to historical moments and, in so doing, reveal the influence of Dyer's work. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Dyer argued that stars represent 'typical ways of

behaving, feeling and thinking in contemporary society, ways that have been socially, culturally, historically constructed' (DYER, 1987: 17). He also described stars as 'embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives, [...] categories of class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so on' (DYER, 1987: 18). This prompted many star scholars, European scholars especially, to investigate the ambiguous and often contradictory ideologies embodied by stars. So, for instance, in the introduction to *Stardom in Postwar France*, John Gaffney and Diana Holmes write that,

'Stardom may be read as a symbolic portal into the nature of a culture, stars as that culture's ultimate expression. At the same time, stars, by their very nature, are what most people are not, are symbolic negations of a given culture' (GAFFNEY and HOLMES, 2007: 1).

The authors go on to explain that stars frequently offer audiences something new, something more exciting and aspirational, more glamorous than the reality of life in the culture to which they belong. This idea, which harks back to Edgar Morin's work as much as Dyer's, embraces both the glamour and the inherent contradictions of stardom. Simultaneously, stars are held to reveal something fundamental about a society at a particular historical moment and yet also defy, challenge or seek to transform it. This is illustrated in a chapter of *Stardom in Postwar France* devoted to Brigitte Bardot by Diana Holmes, which examines the French star in terms of zeitgeist. Here, Holmes situates Bardot's fame within the context of the rapid social changes in 1950s' France and, in particular, the growth of youth culture. This involves an exploration of the ways in which the actress 'incarnated' the values of a young generation in the mid to late fifties (HOLMES, 2007: 46).

Studies that seek to establish the various ways in which a film star embodies or incarnates a particular set of social values or a specific and identifiable period within a culture's history run the risk of being deemed reductionist and over-simplified. This was something that Richard Dyer was at pains to avoid in his own work. In the 'Preface' to *Heavenly Bodies*, for instance, he declared that his objective was 'to find a way of understanding the social significance of stars which fully respects the way they function as media texts, yet does not fall into a view of

7. Another common theme of *Stella Encounters* concerns the legacy of stars, many authors exploring why certain stars have been quickly and thoroughly forgotten after their period of stardom. This theme was subsequently taken up by authors compiled in the anthology *Lasting*

Screen Stars (2016), edited by Lucy Bolton and Julie Labalzo Wright. This contains chapters on Italy's Sophia Loren, Hungary's Pál Jávör, France's Jean-Louis Trintignant and Emmanuelle Riva, and Britain's James Mason, Margaret Rutherford and Diana Dors.

a given star as simply reflecting some aspect of social reality that the analyst cared to name' (DYER, 1987: ix). To avoid oversimplifying the ways in which stars reflect national cultures at historical moments, Dyer focused on the role of audiences (and various different types of audience) and how they interpret and make use of star discourses. Many star scholars have heeded Dyer's cautionary note, exploring how stars incarnate social groups and ideologies at historical moments in ways that avoid the pitfalls of a 'reflectionism'. One of these has been to examine the work of stars across different national contexts, while another has been to examine the work of a particular star across various decades of his or her career.

During the twenty-first century, a considerable amount of star scholarship has focused on transnational dimensions of stardom and, in particular, what happens when a star moves from their country of origin to Hollywood. This, for instance, lies at the heart of Alastair Phillips and Ginette Vincendeau's anthology *Journeys of Desire: European Actors in Hollywood* (2006). One of the things to merge from this is the way that many European actors working in Hollywood have been typecast in roles that conform closely to national stereotypes; for instance, with German and English male actors being used to play villains, while French and Italian actresses have been cast as sex sirens much more often than British actresses (PHILLIPS and VINCENDEAU, 2006: 14). On the other hand, some European stars have been able to expand their repertoire of roles by moving from one national film industry to another.⁸

Lisa Downing and Sue Harris' *From Perversion to Purity: The Stardom of Catherine Deneuve* (2007) demonstrates the advantages of studying the films and images of a star across different countries over several decades. In this anthology of essays, one of France's most glamorous film stars is removed from a specifically national context, her work being examined across several national film industries, including Italy. Meanwhile, audience readings of Deneuve's star text are used to highlight the paradoxes and contradictions of her stardom; including within her films, across her films, and between her on- and off-screen star persona. Here, the book's editors advocate an approach to stardom that looks beyond a star's work and significance within a specifically national context (DOWNING and HARRIS, 2007: 7). This would seem to be a particularly fruitful approach for scholars of European stardom

given that so many European stars have to work in various countries to sustain a financially viable film career. Downing and Harris not only provide a compelling justification for the single star case study in the introduction to their book but they also draw attention to some of the disadvantages of the national star study (in which a star is read as emblematic of a specific national culture). 'The model which considers stars only in the context of a national cinema risks perpetuating a hermetic idea of "the nation" within and through which the star is uniquely understandable' (DOWNING and HARRIS, 2007: 8).

When *From Perversion to Purity* was published, single star case studies were relatively rare. However, many more have since been published, partly due to the fine example set by Downing and Harris's book, but also in part due to the launch of the British Film Institute's *Film Stars* series. Since 2012, the BFI has published numerous single star studies, including books on France's Brigitte Bardot by Ginette Vincendeau (2013), Germany's Hanna Schygulla by Ulrike Sieglöhr (2014) and Spain's Penélope Cruz by Ann Davies (2014). All of these, moreover, examine films made beyond the star's country of origin, noting the ways in which the star's image and nationality have been utilized in a variety of ways at different stages of her career by different kinds of audience. Like many recent star studies, these also engage with other aspects of stardom, such as transmediality (comparing a star's work in film with their television and/or theatre work) and celebrity (comparing a star's film persona to the image of them that circulates more generally within celebrity cultures). In so doing, these respond to many current debates within Star Studies. Yet, at the same time, they also represent the culmination of the aims, methods and ideas provoked by the pioneering work of the scholars discussed above.

Conclusion

If anything, this account demonstrates that scholars in Europe have conducted much of the world-leading academic research on film stars and stardom since the 1950s. There have undoubtedly been many more insightful and original star studies produced across Europe than those discussed here; particularly ones published in languages other than English. As an Anglophone scholar with very limited linguistic ability,

8. This is illustrated in some of the essays compiled in Russell Meeuf and Raphael Raphael's *Transnational Stardom: International Celebrity in Film and Popular Culture* (2013). See, for instance, Miguel Fernández Labayen and Vicente Rodríguez Ortega's essay on Javier Bardem,

which compares the critical reception of his film performances in Spain and the USA and considers how Spanish and American audiences have been presented with quite diverse impressions of this leading Spanish film actor.

I am not well placed to conduct a comprehensive survey that includes a wide-ranging review of published academic literature on stars from across Europe. Yet such an enterprise would be hugely instructive and most welcome. It is clear that Star Studies has spread across many European nations, large and small, and important work on film stars and stardom has been, and is being, conducted. It is also clear that such work deserves a wider reception across the international academic community. Here, surely, lies the future of Star Studies. For in this way, the vitality and diversity of this rich branch of film studies will be sustained.

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