

Simone Signoret 1921–1985: the star as sign—the sign as scar

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1. The sign as scar and the *mise en scène* of suffering

The first part of this essay will address the second part of the title: the sign as scar—although inevitably the notion of star as sign will also inflect this first reading of Simone Signoret. However, I need first to give some narrative texts of the star in question in order to put in place perceptions of her that situate her in all her complexity. The first comes from extracts from Catherine David's biography of Signoret.¹ Despite its proclivity to hagiography, the book does have the merit of perceiving the multi-faceted nature of Signoret—one of the many pre-requisites to stardom—and indeed of hinting, in the final extract, at what is one of Signoret's greatest attractions: her ability to appeal to men and women alike (a point that will be developed in the second half of this essay). David positions Signoret as anti-star first of all, then as a site for history, and, finally, as woman-as-man:

On the sofa in my living-room, files are spread out everywhere, marked 'Signoret' (...) There are old press cuttings that catch one's heart: in the fifties, she was 'one of the most popular film stars', dressed in 'flannel slacks and a turtle-necked sweater'. She smoked Gauloises, and she was already an 'anti-star', 'a tough customer', but with a real heart'. (1)

Simone Signoret (...) is a 'good subject', because she gives the writer a great deal to think about, and opens windows on to many different landscapes—the cinema, St. Germain-des Prés, the French Left, romantic love, Communism, Hollywood, writing, Judaism, Human Rights, twentieth-century culture... Through the images that Simone Signoret has left us of the different stages of her life, we can watch the whole century unwinding like a film, from Sartre's Neuilly to Jacques Prévert's Café de Flore to the Hollywood parties with Kirk, Lee, Vivien and the others, from the conversations with Krushchev in 1956 to Pierre Goldman's trial in 1974. Here is the century in all its

1 *Simone Signoret*, transl. Sally Sampson, London, 1992.

complexity, showing its tragic underside as well, since Simone Signoret, born in Wiesbaden in the Rhineland occupied after World War I, came face to face with the result of the great dramas that had gone on before. (5–6)

Simone Signoret's work was her life, or rather her lives (...) there were her successive lives, from young girl to woman, film extra to star, from Catherine's mother to Montand's wife: from secretary at a pro-Nazi newspaper to the woman who signed the '121' manifesto; from the Communist fellow-traveller to the champion of Human Rights. This is the story of one of the very few women of our time to have finally reached the very masculine—some might say paternalistic—status of 'the Just', of being considered a moral conscience for the nation. (6)

The second narrative is from another biographer, also a woman—Joëlle Monserrat. She describes Signoret as having four lives: that of an actress, a politically engaged artist and sentinel of the rights of man (sic), a lover, a writer.²

The third narration is Signoret's own: 'The person I am today was born one evening in March 1941'.³ This was when she was first introduced to the frequenters of the Café de Flore in St Germain-des-Prés. This was a café where left-wing intellectuals met and formed the radical *Groupe d'octobre*. Amongst the group was Jacques Prévert and the man who would become Signoret's first husband and father to her only child Catherine, the film maker Yves Allegret. Signoret was actually born in Wiesbaden in 1921, and her name was Simone Kaminker. She was half Jewish from her father's side, but she changed her name to Signoret, her mother's maiden name, during the Occupation in order to be able to obtain bit parts in films (being half Jewish meant she could not get the COIC card which would permit her to have actress status, but by hiding her Jewish name she could get walk-on parts that did not require presentation of the card).

The fourth narrative is an imaginary picture display of Signoret, a visual representation of her 'different lives': Signoret as rising actress, as star, as mother, as rival, as writer and, finally, as a woman prematurely aged by the

2 *Simone Signoret*, Paris, 1983.

3 David, 11.

ravages of cancer. Indeed, Signoret's stunning looks 'deteriorated' in a rapid five year period (1961-66)—her body, many film critics asserted, having become the site of emotional scars. I shall later enlarge on one particular aspect of this deterioration through what Ginette Vincendeau has termed the *mise en scène* of suffering and see how this relates to Signoret's own story.⁴

The fifth narrative goes like this: as a sign of the times, which stars are,⁵ Signoret is/was a double-edged sign. For although she was of her time she did not fit in with the prevailing norms either in terms of her performance or her real life. As we shall see, she was both before and after her time. By 1947 Signoret had appeared in thirteen films, but it was not until her performance as Dédée in *Dédée d'Anvers* (Yves Allegret, 1947) that she made her entry onto the screen on a grand scale. And by 1952, she was a household name thanks to her role as Marie in *Casque d'Or* (Jacques Becker, 1952). In both roles, Signoret plays the part of a prostitute who briefly encounters true love only to lose the loved one to a gruesome end (murder and the guillotine, respectively). She performs both parts with a rich sensuality. Critics spoke of her incendiary eyes and her long slim legs. However, it would not be Signoret who would be groomed for export as the sex symbol of France's womanhood to rival Hollywood's Rita Hayworth or, more significantly as we shall see, Marilyn Monroe. It was first Martine Carol and then Brigitte Bardot who were the 'chosen ones'. Signoret herself commented on this 'exclusion' by observing that, unlike Carol and Bardot, she did not have the right shape and that she was getting older. So she always came 'second', and, in the meantime, as she explained, Bardot 'left everybody else standing' (David, 128). Much later, the *Nouvel Observateur* (25.1.85), in writing about her career, also made the point that Signoret did not possess the 'look de l'époque—minois mutin, seins pigeonnants, taille éntanglée, de Martine Carol ou de Françoise Arnoul'.

4 'The *mise en scène* of suffering: French *Chanteuses réalistes*', *New Formations*, III, 1987, 107-28.

5 See Richard Dyer, *Stars*, London, 1979 and Christine Gledhill (ed.) *Stardom: The Industry of Desire*, London and New York, 1991.

However, in the 1950s, Signoret was a stunning looking woman who exuded sexuality and so we must look for other more convincing reasons as to why she was apparently less valued in her native country than elsewhere. If France was not prepared to adopt her, at the height of her beauty, as their national icon—as they certainly were with BB—there are at least four major reasons. Interestingly, critics of the 1950s may have touched on one of the reasons for her ‘coming second’. They saw her as an actress who was more in the tradition of a certain cinematic woman of the 1930s—the tough, sexy, disruptive, *gouailleuse* type associated most famously with Arletty. Although this was quite a compliment, it was an association that did not favour her in the post-war period, but rather put her out of synch.

In the first instance, Signoret’s difference from other female stars of the time marked her out as distinct. As I shall go on to show, in the second part of this essay, Signoret in her performances is ineluctably the subject of her own desire—not the object. She is a woman in her own sexual right as opposed to the infantile-eroticism ‘imposed’ upon Bardot. In this respect she went against the grain and, although she was admired as a ‘woman’s woman as much as a man’s’ (Columbia Studios press release, 1962), in the 1950s strength and independence in a woman were threatening to the patriarchal order that so strongly prevailed in France at that time. Secondly, and following on from that point, although of the 1950s, in fact Signoret was a vanguard woman of the 1970s—which is maybe a part explanation of the great popularity, with French audiences, of her 1970s films.⁶ (What is extraordinary about this rise in popularity is that it coincides with the time when her body was showing all the signs of being ravaged by the consequences of her assuming the right to auto-determination/destruction. By the late 1960s she had progressed from the ‘flawless’ French beauty of the 1950s to a different set of signs: woman as the site of suffering/ageing.)

6 It is also true that she became better known to a younger audience as a result of her TV appearances, most notably *La Femme juive* (1968), *Un Otage* (1970) and *Madame le juge* (1976).

A third reason for her being undervalued in the 1950s has already been touched upon and concerns the roles she played in the films of that decade which, for the most part, fixed her as an anachronism. *La Ronde* (1950), *Casque d'Or* (1952), *Thérèse Raquin* (1953) and *Les Diaboliques* (1954)—her four major French films of the 1950s are all redolent with the legacy of the 1930s tradition of Poetic Realism. This was no longer a popular style in a France that was trying to modernise itself. The aura of fate that surrounded the leading protagonists was too depressing by far. And as Signoret herself declared, in an interview with Monserrat, she never played a *femme fatale* but mostly the victim of fate or circumstances:

—Les personnages qu'on vous a fait jouer jusqu'à 1955 étaient assez proche de la femme fatale (...)

—Non, là je ne suis pas du tout d'accord avec vous. Les femmes fatales sont des femmes qui agissent sur le destin des autres. J'ai plutôt joué des rôles de victimes. Même Thérèse Raquin est beaucoup moins fatale dans le film que dans le livre (...) (Monserrat, 233)

So on the one hand her roles place her in the past and as victim and yet, on the other, in her performance style she acts as agent of desire which more closely aligns her with the image of independent womanhood associated with the 1970s. These conflictual signs, therefore, ran against the audience's need for consistency in a star's image and contributed to diminish her star status—at least during the 1950s.

A fourth reason for her undervalued status in her own country concerns her political positioning which she had held ever since her awakening at the Café de Flore in 1941 and which became reinforced after her marriage to Yves Montand, a man at that time strongly committed to the Left. Signoret supported the Soviet Republics and the French Communist Party although she was not a member. She visited Moscow and Krushchev with Montand who was doing a singing tour shortly after the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary (a visit which, as she was later to reveal, caused her much embarrassment because of its timing). Her positioning then from the early 1950s was one that was 'inappropriate' in the climate of the Cold War and one for which she was vilified (particularly after the Moscow visit) in the French right-wing press.

However, in the 1960s, everything changed and she became almost a national icon. What caused the public to change its mind? A first reason is

one I have already suggested. By the 1960s, as a woman before her time—more one of the 1970s—her modernity and her positioning as woman in her own right could be appreciated. The climate of the time was that of the youth generation (what François Giroud named so famously *la nouvelle vague*) and of the so-called liberated female. But the other reason is a fundamentally more personal one—leading to a quite different, even contradictory identification process on the part of the French nation. In 1949, Signoret met and fell in love with Montand. She separated from and later divorced Allegret and married Montand in 1951. Their love was an extremely public affair; Signoret-Montand were seen as the dream love-ticket and their love affair ‘became a myth for a whole generation’ (David, 54). But then, in the late 1950s when, finally, post-McCarthy, Signoret and Montand were permitted to visit the United States and Signoret received an Oscar for her performance in *Room at the Top* (1958), her belief in Montand was to collapse. Montand and Signoret had met Marilyn Monroe and her husband Arthur Miller on this trip which included a singing tour for Montand. Later, in 1960, Montand was cast against Monroe in a George Cukor film *Let's Make Love*. In the meantime Signoret was in Italy shooting *Adua E Le Compagne* (*Adua and her Companions*), and Montand and Monroe had a much publicised affair. Signoret's marriage, as far as the French nation was concerned, was under threat. It was a national issue. To quote from the *Evening Standard* at the time: ‘When it was thought that Signoret might have lost her husband to Marilyn Monroe, an American, this was a serious blow to the prestige and standing of French womanhood’. By getting him back, the article continues: ‘She restored French pride in what has been held to be a predominant characteristic of the French woman—her superiority in matters of love to women of any other nationality’ (19.5.61). The irony is that although she was already recognised in the UK and the USA as a great actress, it took her husband's infidelity to project her into ‘stardom’ in her own country. It is claimed that the betrayal left its scars. Whatever the case, in five years time—at the age of 45—Signoret's looks had radically altered and she continued to age rapidly. What she has to say herself about emotional scars versus physical ageing makes it clear that the former are far more significant in her eyes: ‘Les meurtrissures extérieures sont beaucoup plus visibles mais les blessures morales, infiniment plus graves’ (Monserat,

164). In any event she always shrugged off her loss of good looks, but in return repeatedly asserted her agency over her ageing. And it is to this point, in relation to the notion of the *mise en scène* of suffering, that I now want to turn.

In her article, Vincendeau speaks of the notion of the spectacle of suffering as a major *raison d'être* of the *chanteuses réalistes*. She examines the self-display of pain as enacted by several of France's leading *chanteuses* with special focus on Fréhel and Piaf. In both instances the singers' songs of love and distress and their real lives were virtually one and the same. They brought authenticity to their performance: they had led the life they sung about. The happy love affair ending in disaster followed by recourse to drugs and alcohol as a cure and the inevitable destruction this excess wrought on their bodies was all on display for the prurient to watch. Fréhel grew fat and lost her looks, Piaf became emaciated. For our purposes, I will focus on Fréhel's case because it has clearer comparative resonances with Signoret—although as we shall see the outcome is quite different.

Fréhel's career was already at its summit in the pre-World War One years. It was a disastrous love affair with Maurice Chevalier that was to send her on the downward path to physical ruin. The beauty that she had been was all but erased by the early 1930s when she turned her hand to appearing in movies in order to make some much needed money. In these movies, she more or less agreed to playing herself, to putting her suffering and the visible manifestations of it up on the screen in the form of her wracked body and by referring to its disease either by song or in dialogue with younger women of the same class and uneasy, unstable profession. The film that most poignantly captures this *mise en scène* of suffering is Duvivier's *Pépé-le-Moko* (1936). In a fairly central scene to the film, Fréhel—who is playing the role of Tania, a former music-hall celebrity now down on her luck and living in the Casbah of Algiers—is trying to console Pépé (played by Jean Gabin) who is trapped in the Casbah and who can only dream of returning to his beloved Paris. Tania advises him to do what she does when she's feeling low—think back to olden times—for her, these times are when she was a big success at the Scala, the top music-hall in Paris. She turns to a wind-up gramophone, says how she thinks of her former beauty, the camera pans to a photograph of her (a real Fréhel of the Scala days in full bloom), puts on a record (a real Fréhel recording)

Où est-il donc? which is all about a lost love and a lost Paris. Tanis/Fréhel then starts to sing along with the song at its most gut-wrenching melancholy moment and the scene closes with a close-up on her face with tears welling in her eyes. Fréhel the present object of prurience for the audience sings of her pain and misery of the past that turned her from the adored beauty of the 1910s and 20s into a fat, prematurely aged woman.

As Vincendeau says, 'there is obviously something morbid, even necrophiliac, in the way these diseased bodies are consumed as spectacle' (124). There is also something inherently masochistic in the willingness to go on screen and repeatedly bear verbal witness to one's own decline. And it is here that Signoret differs. She refused the *mise en scène* of suffering even though her body was clearly on the decline. She both assumed her decline and turned it to her advantage. Let us compare what press coverage of her decline had to say with her own account. The first two quotes are from publications some eleven years apart:

Ever since devotees of French film saw Signoret long ago in *Dédée d'Anvers* playing a young waterfront whore with incendiary eyes and long slim legs, she has maintained her impact not only as an actress of conviction but as a luscious example of sensual woman in full bloom (...) Although Signoret is today a mature woman of 45 with a full face and a ripe indeed matronly figure she is still a past mistress of the slow sulphurous look and the throaty purr of invitation. (*Queen*, 11.5.66).

The tender qualities she showed in her early films (...) are only memories now. Her manner is tough. There's a rough, fruit peel texture to her skin. A hard smile braces the edges of her mouth. She had broad fullback shoulders and short masculine hands. (*The Evening Standard*, 4.11.77)

Signoret herself says (she is speaking in 1964) that when she looks at her face and its rugged lines it leaves her indifferent and she would not consider a face-lift (Montserrat, 164). In 1973 she says:

je trouve qu'il n'y a rien de plus triste qu'une comédienne de mon âge qui, à force d'artifices, essaie de paraître trente ans. Quel calvaire ça doit être de lutter désespérément contre les rides et les poches sous les yeux! D'autant plus que les comédiennes qui refusent de vieillir ratent de très beaux rôles (...) Si j'ai changé je n'ai à m'en prendre qu'à moi. Par fainéantisme, je me suis laissée aller (...) Mais en fin de compte je me demande si ce laisser-aller ne m'a pas servie. Les heures que j'aurais passées à conserver une silhouette, je ne les ai pas vraiment

perdus puisque, pendant ce temps-là, j'ai vécu. Or, c'est le fait d'avoir vécu qui permet à un comédien d'évoluer. C'est en vieillissant que l'on joue de mieux en mieux, parce que l'expérience vous permet de jouer en profondeur tout ce que l'on a connu, joies ou drames. (Monserat, 230-1)

Some women, says Signoret, do not want to let go of their physical prestige. They want it suspended for eternity, so they disappear. And the example she gives is Garbo (she's speaking in 1978):

Elle a voulu rester Garbo. Ça fait quarante ans! J'espère qu'elle s'amuse beaucoup dans la vie, qu'elle a plein d'amis, qu'elle fait des trucs intéressants (...) En même temps, je comprends qu'on choque les gens et qu'on leur fasse un peu de chagrin quand on change au même rythme qu'eux (...) Au fond c'est ça qui les emmerde: c'est qu'on vieillisse en même temps qu'eux. (Monserat, 270)

And of course it is this last point that is central to the railings of the *Evening Standard*. Beautiful women must not be seen to grow old and, therefore, presumably, ugly. The point is of course that ugliness is a state of mind and as Signoret herself asserted, by declaring herself fat and ugly, she had the very alibi that would enable her to play fat, old, 'ugly' but interesting women as she did in *La Vie devant soi*—in her role as the aged prostitute Mme Rosa.⁷ And, during the 1970s in particular, she turned her loss of looks to her advantage, using this to take on roles as older women. In fact she starred in thirteen films during the 70s, a third of her star performances over a forty year period.

In the first instance, then, Signoret assumes her changing. She asserts her agency over her decline. There is no outside other/otherness that is responsible (no matter how much some might like to blame Montand). This is also part of Signoret's seductiveness as star. Her authenticity is unquestionable. In effect she is saying 'I have made myself what I am'. Her attractiveness lies too in her populist approach to her self, to her display of 'ordinariness' as her language exemplifies. But, another major element in her resistance to the *mise en scène* of suffering was that she never relinquished being the subject of

7 'Je suis grosse et moche, je vais m'en servir pour faire Mme Rosa' (Monserat, 271).

desire, of sharing equally in the exchange of gazes between man and woman. From *Dédée d'Anvers* right up to her very last film, *L'Etoile du nord* (1982), Signoret remains the agent of her subjectivity. In the former film she lays her eyes on the man of her desire, a gaze that is fulsomely returned. In the latter she fulfils her desire to befriend a middle-aged man, who is as much lost in his own despair as she is in her own; as a result they share personal stories that help bring to the surface their mutual humanity. It is this notion of agency that brings us to the second part of this essay.

2. The star as sign

I want here to put in place a number of markers concerning the star as sign, a sort of typology, and develop them in relation to Signoret. The key terms—stardom, performance, and gender representation—will overlap.

Signoret has always rejected the idea of her being a star. And yet she won the British Academy Award for *Casque d'Or* (1952), the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale for *Thérèse Raquin* (1953), the Oscar for best actress for her role as Alice Aisgill in *Room at the Top* (1958) and the Oscar for the best foreign film for *Madame Rosa* (1977). Furthermore, in a 1987 opinion poll run by *Paris-Match* she and Jean Gabin are listed amongst the twelve most significant personalities of the century (David, 74). The alignment with Gabin is quite relevant and for two reasons. First, Gabin spent his whole career making sure of his status as superstar and carefully tended to the Gabin myth (from proletarian hero in the 1930s to avuncular property-owner from the 1950s).⁸ Signoret herself says: 'Je n'ai jamais été ce qu'on appelle une star' (Montserrat, 229). Stars she claims always play the same role: they get fixed (poor Gabin!). And she does not like the masks, the disguises that stardom obliges you to wear constantly. She finds it too tiring (154). In the second instance she would not accept the epithet of 'monstre sacré', which conversely Gabin was quite happy to do (229). However, she was a star, she had it foisted upon her by the French public to the point that by the time of her death in 1985

8 See Claude Gautéur and Ginette Vincendeau, *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d'un mythe*, Paris, 1993.

she had attained iconic dimensions that were almost nationalistic in tone (something that she would have hated). What follows are some readings of Simone Signoret, the star as sign.

First of all what does stardom mean? To answer this question I have turned to the work of Richard Dyer, Christine Gledhill and Annette Kuhn.⁹ Film stars are the product of many texts, including pin-ups, publicity releases, interviews (which Signoret notoriously hated) and press coverage of both their public and their private lives. Star texts then are intertextual: many texts all referring to 'one' person. But these texts are not necessarily equal, some have or can have greater importance than others (depending also on who reads them), and they can evolve over the years. Thus Signoret's political text, which has always been seen by her as a lesser one,¹⁰ has been perceived as a very big one, first by the American authorities in the 1950s (she was refused a visa during the McCarthy era even though she had a contract to work with Howard Hughes in Hollywood) and, second, by De Gaulle when he was in power. He got her banned from the state theatres, radio and TV for signing a petition (the 121 petition) in 1960, urging Frenchmen not to fight in Algeria. As far as she was concerned it was the text of Signoret as writer that was most important—this was the role she adopted in later life—more important even than the text of Signoret as actor. And yet the general public saw the latter as the more important of the two.

Richard Dyer also makes the point that audiences are part of the making of the star image. Where Signoret is concerned, the public created several. The first was that the Signoret they saw on the screen was in fact the real self, the strong-minded, independent woman, also part of a couple with Montand, the dream-ticket. Post-Monroe, she was elevated to the status of a national icon of French womanhood. The public saw her as politically committed and therefore sincere, especially after she admitted that she had been disabused

9 See Dyer, *Stars*, Gledhill, *Stardom*, and, Annette Kuhn, *The Power of the Image*, London and New York, 1985.

10 'Arrêtez de me parler de mon combat politique, ça n'a jamais été un combat politique. Ce sont des coups de coeur humanistes, de la façon la plus démodée, et qui n'ont rien à voir avec la politique. Je refuse cette expression' (Monserat, 279).

over the Soviet Union after its invasion of Hungary in 1956. Because of her authenticity-cachet her performances were always believable. This applied whether she was victim or *diabolique*. According to Signoret, people adored Dédée because she was so kind and generous and yet so sadly a victim of society. Yet after she had made *Manèges* (1949), in which she plays a scheming bitch, people no longer smiled at her in the street. And after *Les Diaboliques* (1954), in which she plays a scheming mistress, aiding her lover to do away with his wife, those black looks got even darker (David, 47).

The attraction of a star for the audience, says Dyer, is that s/he speaks in the name of the individual (not the industrial complex such as Hollywood or capitalism), and articulates what it is to be a human being in contemporary society. To have super-star status, then, the star must be both extraordinary (completely unlike us, inhabiting a life beyond our dreams but which they must act out for us) and ordinary (just like one of us). Signoret never failed to meet this criterion. She had an aura but she also had a strong streak of populism and emanated a sense of being in touch with the real world. In virtually all of her films there is an expression of concern with contemporary society: the status of women caught in the poverty trap, the death penalty, the more cruel reality of the Resistance, the modernisation of France and so on. To quote two examples: in *Le Chat* (1971) the threat of modern concrete high-rise urbanisation in the old quarters of Paris is strongly present. The traditional quarter is almost completely demolished and the only house that appears to be left standing is the one in which she and her estranged husband live—and even that will be gone soon. *La Veuve Couderc* (1971) deals with the rapidity of change, which was a problem in France at the beginning of the 1970s. There was no solution coming from politics (France was just entering a period of serious depoliticisation as a result of the failure of May '68). Sexual liberation was not offering a solution either, nor was technological progress. Couderc (played by Signoret) attempts to introduce pragmatic rather than radical change but perishes for her efforts. So as a star, Signoret was a sign of her times—even though in the 1950s this was not always recognised.

In France, unlike Hollywood, it is possible for stars to make up their own images: Gabin did it, BB did it in the end (by retiring in her early 30s as a millionairess), and so did Signoret. A 1962 publicity release from Columbia

Studios makes this abundantly clear: Simone Signoret is an 'actress who as sheer woman both excites men and magnetises the curiosity of other women'. It is her appeal to both sexes that points to her specific, multi-faceted quality as star, a fact which permits both male and female spectators to undergo an identification that is not straightforwardly gendered with the persona on screen. And it is in this respect that Signoret excites and magnetises—which brings me obviously to considerations of visual pleasure.

Visual pleasure, or scopophilia, has come to refer in cinema to the pleasure in viewing the female star.¹¹ The male star (unless he is Gabin) is the holder of the gaze. He is the subject, she the object of desire. And the spectator 'naturally' takes up the position either of the male or female persona. Kuhn observes that in order to challenge dominant representations of women in film it is necessary first of all to understand how they work.¹² And in the case of Signoret, in seeing how that representation works as measured against her performance, we can see how she subverts those dominant practices.

In basic terms, according to Laura Mulvey there are four essential points to the functioning of scopophilia. First, images of women have traditionally been the province of the male gaze. Second, to possess a woman's sexuality is to possess the woman. Third, to possess the image of a woman's sexuality is also to maintain a degree of control over women in general. Finally, according to this reasoning, the film apparatus works to position the female spectator in a peculiar way whereby she either adopts the passive position of female as object or is forced to identify with the male in the spectator and to see the woman as an object of desire, thus repositioning femaleness (and hence, in a sense, herself) as object. Mulvey's polemic surrounding scopophilia has now been taken further in regard particularly to female spectatorship. Bergstrom, Studlar and Modleski in different ways have argued that the female spectator is positioned bisexually and that central to that positioning is the mother/daughter nexus.¹³ The female spectator is doubly desiring because

11 See Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, XVI, 1975, 6-18.

12 See *The Power of the Image*.

13 Janet Bergstrom, 'Sexuality at a Loss: The Films of F. W. Murnau', *Poetics Today*, VI, nos. 1-2, 1985; Gaylyn Studlar, 'Masochism and the Perverse Pleasures of the Cinema' in *Bill*

when going through the mirror phase the girl child's first love object is the mother, but, in order to achieve 'normal' femininity she must turn away and go towards her father as object of desire. However, frequently, the first desire does not go away. This identification process means then that a female subjectivity in viewing does exist—and in relation to the female star this positions us (as female spectators) as desiring her. The male spectator, much as the male character on the screen, for the most part suppresses his femininity (often projecting it onto the female and punishing her for it). However, he can find himself bisexually positioned if the male character fluctuates between passive and active modes.

Signoret's style of performance ironises the ideological construction of gender (as either/or) precisely through her ability to fluctuate between active and passive modes. She plays with the fixity of gender identity. And it is in this way that she appeals to both sexes. Just to cite one example of the disturbance she produces in the sphere of sexuality, consider her performance in *Casque d'Or*. In this film it is she, as Marie, who is the agent of her own desire for Manda (played by Serge Reggiani). She first meets him at a *guinguette* where he is doing some work as a carpenter. In fact she sees him first as she is dancing with Roland (her pimp). She stares fixedly at him. He responds by looking at her dancing. When he joins her table, at the request of an old friend of his who is part of Marie's entourage, it is she who asks him to dance and he who, like a shy, virginal woman, tries to avoid her gaze by lowering his eyes for the longest time as they swirl around the dance-floor. This fluctuation in roles re-occurs: Later in the film, Manda, now on the run from the police, sends her a note asking her to join him out in the country. We see Marie row up to the shore and come over to Manda who is lying in a field asleep. She leans over him and tickles him with a piece of grass to wake him up and then bends over to kiss him. Manda, then, also fluctuates between the passive and active modes. And it is revelatory that he speaks hardly at all throughout the film, certainly far less than Marie.

Nicholls (ed.), *Movies and Methods*, II, Berkeley, 1985; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, New York and London, 1988.

What is fascinating about Signoret is that as a star she is not the province nor the property of either sex. This is achieved through the aforementioned fluctuation and, by extension, through her ability to offer women an alternative image for themselves to gaze upon—that in which the woman, in this instance Signoret, represents herself as subject of desire and refuses to be the site of structures of exchange and looking. We, as women, have no difficulty in taking up that empowering position of agency because Signoret's style of performance not only challenges dominant representations by being both less and more than the part—through an understated performance—but because it is also redolent with authenticity. This is made clear in the following descriptions quoted by Monserrat:

Simone Signoret, actrice admirable qui sait à la fois être dure et vulnérable, agressive et déchirante, défigurée et belle, provocante et pudique. (an un-named critic describing her in *Les Mauvais coups* (1960), 134)

Elle est incomparable dans son genre. Il n'y a qu'elle pour incarner la femme parvenue à la maturité, à la fois tendre et compréhensive et très réelle, terriblement vraie. (Stanley Kramer on her role in his film *Ship of Fools* (1965), 175)

On ne peut pas marier l'intimisme avec le spectaculaire sans que l'équilibre soit rompu (...) à moins que le comédien ait un talent démesuré au point de nous faire oublier sa qualité de vedette.

Simone Signoret a ce talent. A tout moment elle est cette femme simple du petit bourg de Cheuge et jamais son geste n'est forcé pour qu'il soit quotidien: ce n'est pas Simone Signoret qui torture son linge au lavoir ou coupe une énorme miche mais cette femme vieillie, usée et possessive. (Michel Lelingliney on Signoret's style in *La Veuve Couderc* (1971), 219)

I spoke earlier of Signoret as a double-edged sign; a similar effect is occurring at the level of gender. And, because this represents such a radical departure from dominant ideology—although I am not saying that Signoret alone was subversive in this respect nor that this was a conscious strategy on her part—I shall make two related points that concern ideology and deviancy before addressing this idea of double-gendering.

As far as ideology and gender identity are concerned, I will quote Kuhn:

Discourses on gender identity and sexual difference hold together a range of notions centring on biological sex, social gender, sexual

identification and sexual object choice. The incorporation of these in constructs of gender identity is a historically-grounded ideological project whose effect, it has been argued, has been to set up a heterogeneous and determinate set of biological, physical, social, psychological and psychic constructs as a unitary, fixed and unproblematic attribute of human subjectivity. Within this ideological project, subjectivity is always gendered and every human being is, and remains, either male or female. From this fundamental difference flows a succession of discourses on identification and sexuality. Moreover, in ideology gender identity is not merely absolute: it also lies at the very heart of human subjectivity. Gender is what crucially defines us, so that an ungendered subject cannot, in this view, be human. The human being, in other words, is a gendered subject. And so a fixed subjectivity and a gendered subjectivity are, in ideology, one and the same. (*The Power of the Image*, 52)

Shifting now to deviancy, Dyer identifies two alternative (non-normative) star-types: the anomic and the alienated. The anomic type is the one that does not fit in with the prevailing norms and is outside society in general, the alienated one is alienated by prevailing norms and is therefore outside ruling groups in society. Signoret in her film roles has been quite consistent as an anomic type. She neither fits in with the prevailing norms, nor with tradition. She is either placed outside of society (as whore, uncompromising wife, mistress or widow), or she is doing violence to others (as murderous mistress or wife) or, as in her later films, to herself (as an alcoholic and a chain-smoker).

This anomie needs to be tied in with a second point Dyer makes about female alternative types (mostly of the 1940s). Many of the women stars in the independent woman category—the stars he refers to are Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell—are categorised by sexual ambiguity in their appearance and presentation. In other words they are ‘almost male’ only giving up the role of the phallic woman at the end of the film. Signoret, I believe, does something different. She simultaneously asserts her femininity and her masculinity. So she is not the phallic woman/mother but, rather, is in an (abstract?) sense doubly gendered (small wonder that she excites men and magnetises women). There is an historical reason for this in her own life and there is also a cinematic precedent for this double-gendering. During the Occupation, her father went to England to join the Free French. It is Signoret herself who, in a *Face to Face* interview with John Freeman in 1961, says

emphatically in his questioning her about her father that it was she who was the father of the family: '*I was the father of our family*'. She it was who occupied, took on the patriarchal space/role left vacant by her father. Not cross-dressing but certainly cross-gendering—and this is significant because it ties into the cinematic precedent mentioned above and also into Kuhn's talk of cross-dressing as a resistance to the ideological construction of the gendered subject.

In sound cinema the historical precedent and prototype of this double-gendering was Arletty. In fact, some critics in the 1950s said that Arletty lived on in Signoret. Arletty, though not a star in the sense of Signoret, was a precursor to this duality/equilibrium of genders and it made her very attractive to both men and women. To men, because she was being like them and not like them. She was like them through her cross-dressing and her outspokenness, and not like them because she was a woman (homo-eroticism and hetero-eroticism all in one gaze cannot be a bad thing!). Furthermore there was no question of succumbing to the male at the end of the film. Women liked her because they could appreciate the woman on screen saying what they would love, if only they dared, to say to their menfolk. It must not be forgotten that, in the 1930s, married women were still considered minors in law and that women in general did not yet have the vote. Arletty, then, was a role model for women of her generation.

Cross-dressing, argues Kuhn, is a way of playing with the fixity of gender identity. The person is clothed as the other sex, but the disguise does not totally conceal the truth nor does it reveal it. In other words, the disguise draws attention to a dual possibility: gender enters into a fluctuating sphere, sexual difference now becomes denaturalised (Kuhn, 54). Signoret does not cross-dress literally, but she does occupy both spheres—as she herself asserts. Nor does she have to be represented as 'male', as her Hollywood sisters are, to 'explain away' her sassiness. Nor is she reduced at the end of a film to a single, particularised gender—whatever the outcome of the story. Because she moves fluidly across the genders she dissolves the idea of sexual difference—and that is the source, above all else, of her powerful attraction to men and women. As such Signoret's lasting importance, at least where the ideological functionings of cinema are concerned, lies in the constancy with which as star, performer,

persona she challenges cinematic discourses on gender identity that fix us as male/female and our subjectivity as being eternally fixed and one and the same.