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Transcending Time: Jean Harlow and Hollywood's Narrative of Decline

HEATHER ADDISON

There is a character in a tale by Conan Doyle who continually calls out: "Youth will be served, my masters." The very lamp-posts of Hollywood often shout advertising matter through loud-speakers, but surely over every studio gate should be set a trumpet intoning this most pregnant sentence. . . . Hollywood stars work "under the constant threat of time."

—Jan and Cora Gordon, *Star-Dust in Hollywood*, 1930

There are greater tragedies than Death. Sometimes—in Hollywood—the greatest tragedy of all is Life.

—Dorothy Calhoun, *Motion Picture Magazine*, 1930

The basic idea we need to absorb is that whatever happens in the body, human beings are aged by culture first of all.

—Margaret Morganroth Gullette, *Declining to Decline*, 1997

Introduction

IN RECENT YEARS, SELF-AVOWED AGE THEORIST Margaret Morganroth Gullette has challenged Americans to question our culture's "narrative of decline," a powerful ideology that constructs aging as a debilitating process whose effects begin to emerge at midlife:

Belief that aging is a midlife phenomenon, the interpretive practice of reading our own body and mind for signs of decay . . . telling a life-course narrative constrained by the gross plot options of the system (entrance, peak,

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decline)—these are major features of the curriculum. Even our *feelings* are learned, starting with anticipatory fear of midlife aging, including envy of or anger at the currently young, nostalgic reminiscence that amounts to envying oneself when young, sorrow or even shame about "losses," and premature fear of dying. . . . [We have] fixed youth as a name for fun, sexuality, intensity, hope—all the cultural goods now alleged . . . to have a short shelf life. (*Declining* 5–6)

According to Gullette, we view youth as symbolic wealth that "can be a possession only of the chronologically young—and then only briefly. . . . [We] internalize the meaning of time passing as the loss of our capital" (*Aged* 22). Gullette's work, which draws its evidence of age ideology largely from contemporary American culture, also provides an effective framework for historians who wish to investigate specific incarnations of our society's predilection for youth.

Arguably, a major purveyor of youthfulness both nationally and globally is Hollywood, a dominant, multi-faceted cultural institution that emerged as a film industry center in the 1910s and 1920s. The term *Hollywood*, as employed here, includes not only films produced by companies based in the region of southern California where Hollywood is located, but also the stars who appear in such films; the media that exist to promote the film industry; and the geographical area as well as the lifestyle in and around Hollywood, California. As I will show, from its birth, Hollywood embraced a "cult of youth" undergirded by a concomitant

narrative of decline. Although a comprehensive analysis of Hollywood's cult of youth, which includes films, stars, fan magazines, and other promotional materials, is beyond the scope of one essay, particular manifestations of this phenomenon do afford opportunities to study its character and functions.

One fascinating example of Hollywood's penchant for youth is a long-standing propensity to lionize and recycle screen stars who die young. Ironically, Hollywood stars whose physical lives have been cut short, including silent film stars Barbara La Marr, Wallace Reid, and Rudolph Valentino, and sound film stars Jean Harlow, Carole Lombard, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe, have continued to exist in celluloid, electronic, and print incarnations that, in some cases, have been more popular than those circulated prior to their deaths. (I do not list youthful stars who have died in more recent decades, as the emergence and/or longevity of their afterlives remain an open question.) These stars "live" in the Hollywood hereafter, their youth preserved and exalted indefinitely. "Immortalized" rather than "aged" by culture, they reveal traces of a narrative of decline that has shaped popular discourse across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

This paper, which is both theoretical and historical in purpose, will establish the emergence and existence of Hollywood's cult of youth; offer a case study of screen star Jean Harlow's afterlife to demonstrate that Hollywood's reverence for its youthful dead is an expression of this cult of youth and of the narrative of decline that is used to support and justify it; and consider the long-term impact of Hollywood's narrative of decline upon America's views of aging.

Ageism and Early-Twentieth-Century America

The "constant threat" of aging under which Hollywood stars have operated for decades took root in the 1910s and 1920s, when the birth of Hollywood coincided with a gradual yet fundamental shift in American attitudes toward aging. Prior to the Civil War, older Americans

were esteemed for their virtue, experience, and wisdom, and there was no concept of "retirement." According to W. Andrew Achenbaum and Peggy Ann Kusnerz:

[Before the 1860s] the aged were venerable partly because they served as living evidence that the New World offered a remarkably healthy environment. . . . More importantly, [they] exemplified the virtuous life so highly valued in the formative years of the Republic. . . . In general, older people remained active in their usual pursuits as long as they wished. . . . No profession, trade, craft or business in early America forced workers to retire at 65—or at any other age. (7, 13)

Old age was no sinecure, as many elderly persons faced debilitating diseases, isolation, or poverty; nonetheless, aging was not viewed as a pathological condition, and no arbitrary limits were placed on the span of time during which one might do useful work. Indeed, nearly 80 percent of men over age sixty-five were still active participants in the labor force (Costa 9).

In the years following the Civil War, a new perspective emerged. The Industrial Age and a nascent consumer culture devalued maturity and experience and exalted youth and youthful sexual display. The economy of craftsmanship and agriculture that had been the bulwark of the pre-Civil War era gave way to an industrial system in which accumulated experience mattered less than strength, endurance, and speed. Aging was associated with a loss of productivity (Costa 11). "In many of the new factories, employees became less and less desirable after the age of forty. Workers over sixty or seventy were expendable. . . . Not long after the Civil War, the first industrial mandatory retirement systems in this country went into effect. These policies were designed to increase productivity by eliminating those thought unable to keep up with the pace" (Achenbaum and Kusnerz 33). Labor unions fretted over the obsolescence of older workers. In the 1920s and 30s, the *American Federationist*, the official magazine of the American Federation of Labor, lamented the fact that workers were often considered old at

forty and asked how persons who had reached arbitrary age limits were supposed to survive without the possibility of employment (Wharton 807–09; Stark, “Old at Forty” 454–62 and “Aging American” 519–22).

The impact of the Industrial Age upon American culture was accelerated in the 1910s and 1920s, as improvements in manufacturing processes allowed goods to be turned out more quickly. Factory tasks were broken down into their component parts and streamlined by such figures as automobile producer Henry Ford and efficiency expert Frederick W. Taylor, and the net national product climbed from \$15.8 billion to \$70.3 billion between 1909 and 1929 (May 201). During that period, manufacturers and advertisers sought consumers to absorb the “excess” goods that could now be generated. Breeding continual dissatisfaction and envy was seen as the appropriate mechanism for prompting consumers to buy; therefore, advertising adopted psychological methods that preyed upon consumers’ fears and insecurities and fostered a desire for an elegant, carefree lifestyle. In such a context, “youth” was both a target audience and a tool for creating consumer desire: young adults were viewed as the most receptive audience for such advertising because their buying habits were not yet established, and youthfulness was itself promoted as an enviable state of being that should be pursued whatever one’s chronological age. Ads reminded Americans that they needed to maintain a youthful energy level and appearance if they wished to keep their jobs, their spouses, and their friends. The quest for youthfulness provided a continually expanding market for dieting products, exercise machines, and cosmetics as Americans attempted to stop or reverse the process of aging.¹ This was the cultural stage upon which Hollywood made its debut.

The Birth of Hollywood

At the turn of the twentieth century, “Hollywood” was a small, sleepy suburb near Los Angeles. There was no hint of the explosive growth

that the Hollywood area would soon experience, for the film industry with which it later became synonymous was centered in New York and New Jersey for most of the first two decades of its existence. In 1907, filmmakers began drifting westward in search of cheap labor; reliable, warm, sunny weather; and easy access to a variety of landscapes. They found southern California well-suited to their needs, and studios soon began appearing in and around Hollywood, which was itself ironically spared the fate of becoming the true center of film production when the city passed a zoning ordinance limiting the number of studios within its borders.

As early as 1917, Hollywood was acknowledged as the center of “motion-picture land”: “Perhaps nowhere in the world is there so much of the real atmosphere of movie-land as in Hollywood, California,” gushed *Literary Digest* in a feature article published that year (“In the Capital” 82). “Owing to the fact that . . . many prominent movie folk live in the neighborhood of Hollywood, the great newspaper-reading public of America thinks of Hollywood as a place where the streets are cluttered with movie stars from morning to night,” observed the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1924. It is important to note that Hollywood’s atmosphere included not only film production but also a lavish lifestyle featuring conspicuous consumption of film industry profits, sexual display, and youth-enhancing activities such as dieting, exercise/outdoor sports, and cosmetic surgery (Addison 37–47). Hollywood was, according to film historian Lary May,

an almost mythic place where the movie folk spent money on personal expression. . . . Other countries also centralized studios; but in America the production site was surrounded by a community where the stars really lived the happy endings, in full view of the nation. Here moviedom became much more than something seen on the screen, or touched in the theater. At a time when the birth of a modern family and consumption ideals might have remained just a cinematic fantasy, Hollywood showed how it could be achieved in real life. (189)

Almost from its inception, Hollywood was recognized as something beyond a location; it was a cultural phenomenon whose meaning, power, and impact were psychological as well as physical.

Hollywood's Cult of Youth

If Hollywood became synonymous with the American motion-picture industry, youth was the chief characteristic of that industry. Hollywood, it was said, depended upon youth, demanded youth, and influenced youth. Motion picture fan magazines, themselves part of Hollywood's promotional machinery, touted youth as a near-must for stardom. Producer Jesse Lasky assured screen hopefuls that Hollywood needed both young men and women, though he pointed out that "there are, and probably always will be, many more idolized young women than young men, hence women have a bigger stellar opportunity. . . . There is a glamour, a very spirit of romance, about a beautiful young girl which no boy, however handsome, stalwart and capable, can ever have" (32). The model of mature pulchritude long considered acceptable for stage performers was deemed inappropriate for players who had to appear before the motion picture camera: "On the older stage, with deft make-up and lights dimmed a little, one could play the youthful part, but not before the camera. We have seen them try! . . . No artist has yet been discovered who can at forty imitate youth successfully before the camera, which exaggerates age amazingly. So we need youth!" explained influential silent film director D. W. Griffith (194). Fan magazines bemoaned the cruelty of the camera, which reportedly magnified every facial line, especially in close-up shots. An article in 1929 declared that female stars must be "beautiful—ever beautiful. A round firm face is essential, since the camera really lies. It exaggerates. The average close-up magnifies the subject fifty times. That means that every tiny wrinkle appears on the screen fifty times deeper than it is!" (Albert 31).

Yet, concern about the camera was not the

only force driving Hollywood toward a cult of youth. More fundamentally, Hollywood and the Industrial Age were close partners in the creation of a new youth-oriented—one might even say youth-obsessed—consumer culture. The manufacturing might of the Industrial Age, especially as it accelerated its efficiency in the 1910s and 1920s, created a new surplus of goods. Hollywood, with its vast array of elegant moving images, obligingly provided the consumptive capacity to absorb this excess by promoting the new standards of behavior and appearance to which the public was to aspire. It became the youthful lens through which the desires of a consumer culture were clarified and focused. Indeed, as the nexus of the Industrial Age and the consumer culture that emerged from it, there was arguably no other direction Hollywood could have taken. Motion-picture stars were touted as successful consumers whose youth, beauty, and celluloid fame were at least partially attributable to their wise use of cosmetics, dieting products, and exercise plans. Hollywood continually promoted youthfulness in its films, fan magazines, and lifestyle(s), establishing itself as the cornerstone of America's youthful consumer culture.

The Hollywood Hereafter

Perhaps not surprisingly, Hollywood's worship of youth did not confine itself to living stars. Indeed, dead stars had the advantage of an unchanging appearance that did not inconveniently contradict more youthful images of themselves. The "Hollywood hereafter," a nether region where stars' personas were recycled and reused, conferred youthful immortality upon a number of individuals who died young, some of whom paradoxically enjoyed greater fame in their afterlives than they were accorded during their material existence. This phenomenon has received scant attention in scholarly literature, though the lives of many such stars have been individually documented in biographies whose primary focus is not on the phenomenon of the afterlife.²

Of course, Hollywood has no monopoly on

the many forms that memories may take or on our culture's imperfect solutions to the search for immortality. Though motion pictures may seem uniquely capable of preserving youth and bestowing immortality because they record both motion and appearance, in fact this is not the case. Snapshots, letters, family movies or video recordings, history books, works of art: these fragments, too, can recall the lives or thoughts of both public and private individuals. Indeed, the fine arts have a long tradition of enshrining and/or commodifying the works of dead artists. Art collectors often see the value of a piece increase after its maker dies. However, the enthusiasm that may succeed the death of such artists is, as a rule, for the artifacts left behind, rather than an attempt to recreate the artist's presence or celebrate his or her eternal youth. Hollywood, arguably, confers a unique brand of youthful immortality, one that is dependent not only upon the theoretical power of cinema to halt the progression of time but also upon Hollywood's relationship to the sociocultural milieu into which it was born.

Those who are truly immortal live endlessly *through* time. The foremost products of Hollywood, moving pictures, *arrest* the passage of time. Well-known film critic and theorist André Bazin has argued that humans constantly pursue the "myth of total cinema," a perfect representation of life and reality that defeats death because its intense verisimilitude makes it indistinguishable from life. From their inception, motion pictures represented a significant leap toward Bazin's conception of a total cinema, for they seemed capable of preserving the reality of a particular place and time. The motion picture apparatus could bestow an immortality that was not previously available, an immortality in which aging ceased and yet motion was retained. That capability has become more powerful as color, sound, and glamour photography have allowed celluloid to create memorable, delicately wrought impressions of life. In Bazin's view, the myth of total cinema is a manifestation of our craving for immortality. Nonetheless, the immortality offered by total cinema is illusory, as it does not provide end-

less life that exists *through* time; instead, it creates a representation of life that exists *outside* of time, in a perpetual present that encourages viewers to engage with a film as though its events are happening now. This illusion of a perpetual present tends to temporarily elide any difference between the time of filming (or the time in which the narrative is set) and the time of viewing.

For decades, Hollywood has routinely offered a compelling product that can suspend time, so that future viewers may experience the events recorded as if they were happening at the moment of viewing. This preservation of time, even when the events and/or characters concerned are fictional, is an imperfect though surprisingly credible realization of immortality (or at least an endlessly replaying version of it). Yet for a small number of stars in its pantheon, Hollywood exceeds even these considerable, long-established measures for providing eternal screen life. For those stars who die young, the process of immortalization is both accelerated and expanded. Through their deaths, such stars obligingly remove the last obstacle to immortality: a human body that exists in time and ages, revealing the artifice of its unchanging celluloid shadows (cf. Norma Desmond, the aging silent screen star of Billy Wilder's 1950 classic, *Sunset Boulevard*). The machinery of the motion picture industry exists to halt time, and the death of a youthful star removes the constant reminder that the immortality provided by motion pictures is incomplete. Stars who die and leave us their youthful images thus intensify the apparent power of motion pictures to bestow endless life. Such stars become lasting representatives of Hollywood's cult of youth.

Thus the motion picture industry is disposed toward youth because of the power of cinema to suspend time, but, as I detailed in the previous section, there are also factors particular to Hollywood that prompt it to embrace youthfulness. The cult of youth (and its accompanying narrative of decline) is crucial to an understanding of Hollywood's obsession with its youthful dead. If motion pictures are capable of preserving moments in time, why then do they

typically choose *youthful* moments? Film offers the opportunity to preserve bodies of any age, yet in Hollywood, youthful images predominate. Hollywood discourse engages in a particular kind of preservation, one that exalts the possibility of perpetual youth. The best examples of this everlasting youthfulness are those who provide no evidence to the contrary: stars who die young.

The Youthful Dead

Is youthfulness the only prerequisite for life after death in Hollywood? Or is the selection process more nuanced? Though my sample of youthful dead is of necessity rather small, it is possible to identify patterns in Hollywood's hereafter. In general, the stars who have had the most intense or sustained posthumous fame have been those whose personas were constructed upon the foundations of bold sexuality or disaffected youth. For male stars, exoticism or youthful rebelliousness can predict posthumous renown. For female stars, brazen sexuality that violates the boundaries of traditional female gender roles but does not become dangerously radical confers an advantage in Hollywood's nether region. Of those stars I named in the introduction to this paper, four have had considerable and lasting fame after they were in their graves: Rudolph Valentino, Jean Harlow, James Dean, and Marilyn Monroe. Not insignificantly, three of these owed the success they achieved while they were alive largely to their daring, skillful exploitation of sex. Valentino was known for the lure of romantic passion he created in his films. Harlow flaunted an unabashed sexuality that was moderated with the enforcement of the Production Code in 1934. Monroe offered a complex package of sexual display, open invitation, and fragility. Importantly, though both women contravened ideals of passive femininity, none developed a truly transgressive persona, such as those identified with the so-called vamps of the 1920s (e.g., Theda Bara, Barbara La Marr). The fourth, James Dean, distilled and reflected the disenchantment and disenfranchisement of the baby

boom generation as it reached adolescence in the 1950s. He remains a symbol of marginalized iconoclasm, and thus an ideal candidate for canonization as one of Hollywood's saints of everlasting youth.

Wallace Reid, Barbara La Marr, and Carole Lombard also met youthful ends (1923, 1926, and 1942, respectively), and each was duly anointed by the popular press as an example of immortal youth. "Barbara La Marr's haunting beauty will remain, untouched by time, without necessity of facial operations and beauty treatments," opined *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1930. "Wallie Reid will . . . stand for eternal Youth which does not grow old and tired" (111). "Carole Lombard was a 'shining mark' in the film panoply because of her seeming light heart and gay spirit," eulogized Edwin Schalert in the *Los Angeles Times* in January 1942; "the name of Carole will be one of perennial, forever-living joy."

Nevertheless, none of these performers developed afterlives of the intensity or duration of those accorded Valentino, Harlow, Dean, and Monroe. Reid enjoyed considerable popularity in films for the decade preceding his death from drug addiction at the age of thirty-one, with a screen persona that played upon his status as a clean-cut American boy. The lack of exotic sexuality or otherness in his image may have dulled the public's desire to revive him after death. Barbara La Marr, who died at the age of twenty-nine, gained fame as a vamp or siren, an image that may have made her too marginal or threatening for resuscitation in the Hollywood afterlife. (The exotic sexuality of Rudolph Valentino, though it was threatening to men of his time, did not dampen his fame either during life or death. The same latitude has not been available to female stars.) Carole Lombard, a star in talking pictures, died in a plane crash while on a tour to sell war bonds. She was only thirty-four. Her persona as a feminine yet tough comedienne who could hold her own with any man, even in such sports as hunting, may account for the fact that postmortem discourse emphasized her romance (and marriage) with virile leading man Clark Gable. Three months

after her death, *Photoplay* presented the event from his perspective in "What the Loss of Carole Lombard Means to Clark Gable"; more than a decade later, she still received publicity largely through her association with her husband. "Probably no woman fell as hard for a man as Carole did for Gable," explained Joe McCarthy in *Look Magazine's* 1955 article "The Five Wives of Clark Gable." "To keep him, she changed her whole way of living. Before she met Gable, she went out almost every night to big parties and to night clubs" (104).

How, then, is the youthful Hollywood hereafter distinguished from simple interest in watching old films or reminiscing about stars who have passed away? When a star whose career spanned a number of decades dies, the media typically provide retrospectives of the star's life and films. Such retrospectives are biased toward youth, as the death of Katherine Hepburn in 2003 demonstrates. Media outlets concentrated on photos and film clips of her from the 1930s and 40s, suggesting that more contemporary images were decayed versions of that earlier, younger self, which could take center stage now that the corporeal Katherine Hepburn had finally retired from the world of the living. (Hollywood's vision of death is frequently one in which old age is cast aside at the moment of passing and the deceased assumes the youthful mantle that represents his or her true self. See *Maytime* [1937], *Wuthering Heights* [1939], *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* [1947], *Somewhere in Time* [1980], and *Titanic* [1997].)

Yet, retrospectives, rereleased films, and other materials that appear after the demise of a long-term star arguably lack the fervor and focus on youth that mark the afterlife of a young star who has met an early end. Retrospectives of older stars celebrate the life, achievements, and influence of the figure in question, while resurrections of youthful stars exist to deny death, at least initially. The course of such youthful Hollywood afterlives is biphasic. Immediately after the star's death, fans are in shock, a condition that prompts wishful thinking and, in a few cases, outright denial. Fans may try to attend the star's funeral services,

write letters addressed to the star, or continue their "contact" with the star through the release of the last film completed before her death or the rerelease of her earlier films. Celluloid thus facilitates the illusion that the star is still with us. As time passes and the contemporaries of the dead star begin to demonstrate signs of fading popularity or aging, shock and loss slowly evolve into an appreciation of the dead star's unchanging status and everlasting youth—that is, of the unique immortality made possible by a premature death.

A careful consideration of the means and manner by which each of the youthful stars I have mentioned has continued to "live" is beyond the range of this article, but I hope to sketch the contours of Hollywood's afterlife through a case study of one of them. I have chosen Jean Harlow, a star who has not generated the intense journalistic and scholarly attention that has been accorded her companions in Hollywood's netherworld (Valentino, Monroe, and Dean), yet whose afterlife demonstrates all the classic components of Hollywood's inimitable version of immortality.

Jean Harlow: Forever Young

Jean Harlow, originally Harlean Carpenter, is one of Hollywood's "love goddesses"; she was known as the "Blonde Bombshell" or "Platinum Blonde." The circumstances of her bodily existence, from 1911 to 1937, are significant because they have shaped her life in the Hollywood hereafter. She was born to an upper-middle-class Kansas City couple, Mont and Jean Carpenter, and became a star more by chance than design.³ From the beginning, Harlow's screen persona was based on an unaffected, uninhibited, spontaneous sexuality. Her white-blond hair, which both she and her mother claimed was "natural," and her smooth, blemish-free complexion consistently turned heads. "Very definitely Jean ranks with the great beauties of all time," burbled Ruth Rankin in 1934. "This was my first interview with her, and the physical perfection of the girl struck me almost with a staggering impact. She is so definitely

more beautiful than she photographs. The quality of her skin is something to amaze complexion experts" (112). By 1932, Harlow was establishing herself as a spectacular femme fatale at MGM; *Red-Headed Woman* (1932), based on a best-selling novel about a stenographer who unapologetically uses sex to manipulate men, presented Harlow with a combination of incandescent sensuality and self-deprecation that became her trademark.

Meanwhile, a quick succession of marriages seemed to confirm that her offscreen personality resembled that of the audacious, fickle women she brought to life on celluloid. Divorced in 1930, she married MGM executive Paul Bern in 1932. Two months later, Bern was dead, a probable suicide. He left a sensational yet perplexing note implying that he had done

Harlow a "fearful wrong" and was the object of "abject humiliation." Harlow was able to weather this scandal, but the mystery surrounding Bern's death and her possible role in catalyzing his suicide were exploited in the press for months. In a November 1933 article praising Harlow's acting in the ensemble film *Dinner at Eight* (1933), *Photoplay* mentions the "mysterious death of her husband" and the "scathing publicity" she had to bear. "But," concedes fan magazine writer Curtis Burton, "she held on and fought and slaved and studied" (45). In 1934, Harlow plunged into another ill-fated marriage to MGM cameraman Harold Rosson, who photographed her films; their marriage lasted less than a year.

Harlow's brassy persona brought her under the scrutiny of the Roman Catholic Church,



Photo 1: Jean Harlow at MGM. Courtesy of Photofest.

which established a Legion of Decency to combat what it viewed as Hollywood's production of immoral motion pictures. It threatened to boycott Harlow's films unless she played more wholesome characters. Hollywood responded by enforcing a Production Code that had been written four years earlier and by adjusting the personas of stars like Harlow and Mae West, both of whom especially irked the Catholic Church because of their apparent enjoyment of sex. Harlow's virginity had been up for grabs in her pre-1934 films; it now became something she fiercely protected. In 1935, MGM altered her famous hair, partly to tone down her sexuality, partly to combat the damage done by constant bleaching. Instead of being a platinum blonde, she sported a medium-brown rinse termed "brownette." In *Wife vs. Secretary* (1936), she plays a noble assistant who loves her boss in silence—the alter ego, in other words, of the pre-Code "Red-Headed Woman" who sleeps her way to the top. This was a period of redemption for Harlow, both in the eyes of the Legion of Decency and in her own, for, according to biographer David Stenn, she had longed to play women with "subtlety, dignity, depth, and class" (236).

By 1937 Harlow was a reinvented, more modest sex symbol. According to Stenn, MGM was planning a series of films teaming her with "A-list" stars Robert Taylor, Spencer Tracy, and William Powell. Furthermore, "with Norma Shearer's career foundering without [Irving] Thalberg and both Joan Crawford and Greta Garbo branded 'box-office poison,' Harlow had no competition. Five years and thirteen films after her arrival at the studio, she was MGM's top female star. . . . More than any memory, MGM's big plans for Harlow show its faith in her bright future" (Stenn 226). Her love life was rocky as she waited for beau William Powell to come up to scratch, and she drank too much, but her professional success seemed assured. Yet in late May of that year, during the filming of *Saratoga* (1937), a horse-racing picture in which she was teamed with Clark Gable, Harlow became seriously ill. One week later, on 7 June

1937, she died of kidney failure. Shortly thereafter, her official afterlife began.

Harlow's death was front-page news, even on the East Coast: "Jean Harlow Is Dead Of Uremic Poisoning; Powell Grief Stricken," trumpeted the page-one headline of the *Washington Post* on 8 June. The first major evidence of Hollywood's attempts to immortalize Jean and of her fans' fervor came at her funeral, which took place at Forest Lawn Memorial Park, a cemetery renowned as the resting place of Hollywood's best and brightest. Stenn describes her funeral as a "spectacle" and quotes a pallbearer who explains, "It was the first big Hollywood funeral. [Irving] Thalberg wasn't a public figure and [Rudolph] Valentino had died in New York, so it was quite a scene" (238). On 9 June, a headline on page one of the *Los Angeles Times* declared, "Jean Harlow's Funeral Today: Throngs to Be Kept Away From Church by Special Guard of Police, With Cards Admitting Only 200 to Final Services." Featuring masses of flowers, thousands of onlookers fighting for a glimpse of Harlow's coffin, and strict security, Harlow's memorial service became a prototype of the theatrical "Hollywood funeral" that simultaneously commemorates and exploits a deceased star. The newspapers published descriptions of her body for those who were not privileged to view it: "In death Miss Harlow's face showed no trace of the ravages of her illness," reported the *New York Times*. "A faint smile was frozen in the corners of her lips. Her heavy, luxuriant hair—a shade darker than the platinum blonde hue that made her famous—fell in a rippling cascade around her shoulders" ("Services Today"). At the funeral, Harlow's mother announced that Bill Powell had offered to purchase a shrine for Harlow in the "Sanctuary of Benediction" mausoleum. In perpetuity, fans would have a place to come and commune with their memories of "Our Baby," as the inscription on her crypt read. Her Hollywood immortality was assured. "Harlow's life was over, but her legend had just begun," comments Stenn (240).

Fans also clamored for the release of *Saratoga*, Harlow's final, unfinished film. Initially,

Louis B. Mayer planned to delay the film until it could be rewritten for another actress. When MGM was “deluged” with requests for the film with Harlow’s scenes left intact (Stenn 240), the studio found a double to substitute for Harlow, mostly in long shots or with her back to the camera. On 13 June 1937, the *Washington Post* reported,

It is disclosed by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer that the decision to release “Saratoga”—it was first the company’s intention to write this subject off the books as a total loss—was reached only after an overwhelming public demand had expressed itself in all parts of the country. Fortunately . . . an obscure young actress by the name of Mary Dees, who bears a striking resemblance to Jean Harlow in features, figure and coloring, was secured to complete the few remaining scenes in which Jean was to have appeared.

Saratoga was thus completed and released within two months of Harlow’s death and, despite the fact that critics found it sloppily constructed and Harlow appeared bloated due to her imminent kidney failure, it became her most successful film, suggesting that fans were incredibly keen for any footage of her, no matter how flawed. Exhibitors were also anxious to rerelease earlier Harlow films; *Personal Property* (1937), *Hell’s Angels* (1930), *The Iron Man* (1931), and *Platinum Blonde* (1931) were all reissued to brisk box office.

For months after her death, fan magazines continued to divulge the hidden facts of Harlow’s life. The star system that emerged in Hollywood in the 1910s and 20s framed most star discourse as the revelation of “secrets” to which lucky fans were privy. Richard deCordova has argued that because the star system centers on stars as the capital of the film industry, fans are always hungry for information about the personal lives of stars so that they can understand the magic of Hollywood and motion pictures (112, 140, and 145). Ironically, the most opportune time for such revelations is in the period after a star’s death, when he or she

becomes a much more inscrutable, mysterious figure, one who cannot confirm or refute any of the potentially scandalous details that are revealed. In August 1937, Adela Rogers St. Johns told “The Jean Harlow Story Hollywood Suppressed.” St. Johns’s sympathetic article functioned to recuperate Harlow’s traditional femininity, but it was not above titillating readers. “Desperately, [Jean] wanted the things that all normal women want. . . . She wanted a child. She wanted marriage—a real marriage. She wanted a home. She wanted to be able to eat and drink and live,” lamented St. Johns. “These things were just coming within her reach, just before the end. Even then, they were withheld from her because of [her] success and [the] tragedy which was none of her making [Bern’s death]” (19).

Fan magazine writers also waxed poetic about Harlow’s continuing influence and eternal youth. In October 1937, Faith Baldwin published a short love story in *Photoplay* that was touted as “The Love Story Jean Harlow Asked Me to Write.” Baldwin explains that during the summer of 1936, Harlow called to tell her that she had an idea for a short story about a woman who looks through a telephone book and reminisces about her life. “I wish now that I had written that story for her to read and criticize,” says Baldwin. “But I did not, so I am writing it now” (20). Baldwin concludes her introduction by emphasizing her dismay at Harlow’s passing and expressing her faith in Harlow’s afterlife: “It does not seem credible to me that she has gone. And I am convinced she has not, for as long as there are people to remember her sweetness she remains immortal—forever lovely and forever young” (20). By the end of the 1930s, the first wave of Harlow’s afterlife had ebbed, but a second tsunami was yet to come.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, interest in Harlow peaked anew. The relatively novel medium of television had a voracious appetite for programming, and many old Hollywood films found their way onto the airwaves. An initial offering of Harlow’s movies was part of this trend, but the immediate popularity of her films, par-

ticularly those produced pre-Code, soon made them a staple of evening and late-night network programming. Harlow's smart, confident, voluptuous persona was a convenient icon for the incipient sexual revolution of the late 1950s and early 1960s, which brought greater awareness of women's physical and emotional needs amidst debates about premarital sex, the role of the wife and mother in society, contraception, and abortion. These debates were catalyzed by such events as the release of Alfred Kinsey's classic, controversial report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953); the sale of the first birth control pills in 1960; and the publication of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which exploded the myth that all women were content with domesticity. Also, by 1960 more than twenty-five years had passed since Harlow's death, allowing her contemporaries to age considerably while Harlow's pert, youthful sexuality remained fresh, vital, and surprisingly relevant, since youthfulness was altering the cultural landscape as never before. Baby boomers began to reach adolescence and early adulthood during the late 1950s and early 1960s; between 1955 and 1965, the number of Americans aged eighteen to twenty-one increased nearly 50 percent (Heale 134). As boomers slowly began to question established social and political values and develop a sense of purposeful solidarity, their elders focused new attention on the desires and agency of the "teenager." Thus, in addition to the appreciative longing that Harlow could engender in older fans, her frank sensuality was well suited to the budding rebellion of the vast baby-boom cohort.

During these years, popular culture turned to Harlow for nostalgic inspiration and sexual exploitation. Marilyn Monroe, who maintained that Jean Harlow was her muse, posed as Harlow in a feature story in *Life* magazine and entered into negotiations to star in *The Jean Harlow Story*, scripted by Ben Hecht, Adela Rogers St. Johns, and Sidney Skolsky. Unfortunately, Monroe died in August 1962, before a satisfactory script—i.e., one that Monroe felt did not take advantage of Harlow—could be developed.

In 1961, biographer Irving Shulman, who had no such scruples, acted upon Harlow's fresh popularity by collaborating with her ex-agent, Arthur Landau, on a "tell-all" book, published by Dell in 1964, that purported to disclose the intimate details of her marriages—especially the one with Paul Bern. Stenn aptly describes the book as "scurrilous." For example, Shulman claims that Bern attacked Harlow on the first night of their marriage, initiating the kidney failure that later led to her death. The attack was occasioned by Bern's impotent rage at being unable to perform on that day or any other day during their brief marriage. Shulman describes a conversation between the couple that supposedly occurred shortly before Bern's death:

"Paul," she [Harlow] beckoned, "be a good boy and come to bed."
"Damn you! I'm a man!"
"All right," she agreed. "So—" "
—don't say prove it. Not unless you want me to kill you." (133)

Bern departs the bedroom, only to return minutes later wearing a dildo. "Piling conceit upon conceit, dancing, strutting, Paul burlesqued a worship of the phallus," alleges Shulman (135). He is no kinder to Harlow herself, who is portrayed as a dimwitted, promiscuous female who can neither manage nor quite comprehend her intense fame. The book was the best-selling nonfiction volume of 1964, although "there [were] those who regard[ed] it equally high up on any list of tasteless contributions to American letters," quipped *New York Times* book reviewer Lewis Nichols. Another *New York Times* article suggested that "much of the present public interest in the Harlow story was stimulated by Irving Shulman's best-selling biography" (Bart 28), and Harlow did receive greater television exposure after its publication (five films in one week in the summer of 1964, according to gossip columnist Hedda Hopper). Nonetheless, her revivification in the Hollywood hereafter began well *before* Shulman wrote his biography, although it was no doubt buoyed by the appearance of that salacious volume.

In September 1964, Paramount gave Shulman \$100,000 for the film rights to *Harlow: An Intimate Biography*; meanwhile, other producers rushed to be the first to bring a film about Harlow to the public. In May 1965, Paramount was beaten by producer Bill Sargent, whose hasty film was shot in eight days using the four-camera "Electronovision" process. Howard Thompson of the *New York Times* found the film totally unredeeming: "The cheap, lusterless and excruciatingly dull picture spares the late actress—and the audience—nothing. . . . [This is a] bony, bargain-basement appraisal of a famous, misguided and tragic young woman. . . . Whatever the second Harlow picture looks and sounds like, it can't be much worse than the first" (18). Paramount's film, released two months later, was also painfully bad, yet it dutifully attempted to reconstruct Harlow's glamour and soft-pedaled the coarseness of Shulman's tome, allowing Harlow's persona to retain a measure of dignity and power. "Maybe this one is a little less odious," conceded film critic Bosley Crowther, "because it does have a little more class, a little more sumptuous production [values], a little more feel for Hollywood" (24). Perhaps because of fears of lawsuits, several major names in the film were changed. Harlow, her family, and her husbands retain their real names, but her studio becomes "Majestic" rather than MGM, and she works for Everett Redman rather than Louis B. Mayer. Ultimately the film disappoints in its attempt to recreate Harlow. Carroll Baker's wooden presence makes the appeal of the original all too obvious, and the saturated colors and 1960s jazz score distance viewers from the stylistic features that marked Harlow's films in the 1930s. Both films were accorded a lackluster reception at the box office. Baby boomers may have found the melodramatic conventions of the films unpalatable, and it is likely that older fans were dismayed by the films' failure to reconstruct Harlow's star persona in a credible, engaging fashion—a frequent problem for biographical pictures. The impetus for these films was clear, however: they attempted to capitalize on Harlow's resurgent, youthful celebrity.

On the publication front, Dell, the company that had published *Harlow: An Intimate Biography* in 1964, issued *Today Is Tonight* in June 1965. "Jean Harlow's explosive, long-suppressed novel!" screams the cover. This mediocre novel, which focuses on the "obsessive love" of young married couple Peter and Judy Lansdowne, was based on a manuscript that Harlow had supposedly produced in the 1920s. Arthur Landau, her ex-agent, wrote the introduction, which attributes the novel's publication to the public's "renewed interest in Jean Harlow" (8), while the back cover promises readers that the story's "easy love and unrestrained passion" paint a vivid portrait of both the author and her era: "All the flamboyance, intimacy and implicit tragedy of the era over which Jean Harlow reigned and which, much later, she came to symbolize, are brought to vivid life in this remarkable novel—a shattering love story and an unforgettable glimpse into the soul of its scandal-plagued author." *Today Is Tonight* is offered as yet another means for readers to connect with Harlow as she existed at the height of her youth and fame.

By late 1965, Harlow's posthumous popularity was waning, perhaps aided in its demise by the low quality of the biographical books and films that had briefly resuscitated her, or by an unfavorable comparison between her fleshier body type and the "waif ideal" of the sexual revolution. Her persona may have also been too tame for the more radical counterculture that emerged in the mid- to late 1960s, which not only rewrote sexual mores but also fought persistently for social and political justice. Though there has not been a succeeding wave of interest in Harlow to match the one that flowed across the late 1950s and early 1960s, her films continue to be popular on television and video. Retrospectives of Hollywood's sex symbols rarely fail to include footage of Harlow, punctuating her perpetual youth. A 1999 entry from Turner Classic Movies that focuses specifically on Harlow is hosted by Sharon Stone and emphasizes the lasting appeal of Harlow's unchanging image: "Despite her sudden death at age 26, Jean Harlow has been immortalized

on film. . . . Beyond the legend, the scandal, or the mystery of Jean Harlow is her work, a legacy which transcends time and remains as she was—as she *is*—forever young.” Here the use of the present tense highlights the ability of moving images to present screen personalities as if they continue to live, unaffected by the passage of time. In the parlance of Hollywood’s narrative of decline, Harlow has received worshipful notice because early death cemented her eternal position at the pinnacle of life. For her, there will be no degeneration, diminution, or decay.

Conclusions

The narrative of decline surrounding Hollywood stars continues to be reinforced across the American film industry, even by those who would seem to be in a position to question or criticize it. Ed Asner, past president of the Screen Actors Guild, is an industry activist who fights ageism at every opportunity; in 2002, he helped to form a lobby known as the “Industry Coalition for Age Equity in Media” to fight for more roles for older actors. Though he derides Hollywood’s cult of youth, he tacitly accepts the model of “entrance, peak, decline” for screen performers: “For actors, growing old means [reaching age] thirty-nine. If that’s the peak, that must mean I am now officially dead” (qtd. in Chmielewski). When the Film Stills Archive at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City was closed in early 2002, curator Mary Corliss (wife of *Time* film critic Richard Corliss) romanticized Hollywood’s narrative of decline and offered it as the archive’s *raison d’être*:

Film stills freeze the emotion and excitement of an actor, a scene, a film, an era; they are the pin through the movie butterfly that somehow gives the lovely, ephemeral creature lasting life. Stills distill; stills preserve. . . . When I rummage through bulging ‘personality files’ of movie-star stills, I can see a compressed life story: the freshness and gawky promise of a young actor; the radiant maturity as the star’s appeal is complemented by the filmmaker’s artistry; then,

as age writes its cruel lines on a face, the poignant battle against decay, waged with heavy make-up and lighting that is ever more carefully soft focus. (qtd. in Corliss)

As Corliss’s comments suggest, the narrative of decline regards physical and mental regression as the heartbreaking and inevitable result of aging, with youthful immortality the unattainable yet only possible antidote. Thus, the story of Hollywood’s cult of youth is also the story of a constant search for preservation.

That search has produced a version of immortality that is biased toward youthfulness. In Hollywood, the “luckiest” stars are those who die young. Their fame and eternal youth are assured, since they will never experience the portion of the human life cycle that represents progressive deterioration. They are celluloid butterflies who have been collected by the institution of Hollywood, exquisite creatures whose luster may convince us that youth is worth constantly pursuing and preserving. Margaret Morganroth Gullette charges her readers with recognizing and rejecting this “discourse of decline,” which underpins consumer culture. Thus we must ask ourselves if we wish to accept Hollywood’s persistent cult of youth, the narrative of decline that justifies it, and the form of immortality they entail. Rather than view the life cycle as a hill that crests and offers the best opportunity for preservation in young adulthood (must we be “over the hill” at forty?), we can envision a life that continues its upward climb until the day we die. We can reinvent the experience of aging as one of gain rather than loss. And then by extension, immortality itself might be gradual, continual aging and improvement rather than a frozen version of eternal youth.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the emergence of consumer culture and modern advertising in the 1910s and 1920s, see Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976) and James Rorty, *Our Master’s Voice: Advertising* (New York: John Day, 1934).

2. For information on Wallace Reid, see Eve Golden, *Golden Images: 41 Essays on Silent Film Stars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001). Books on Rudolph Valentino include: S. George Ullman, *Valentino As I Knew Him* (New York: A. L. Burt, 1926); Irving Shulman, *Valentino* (New York: Trident, 1967);; Norman A. Mackenzie, *The Magic of Rudolph Valentino* (London: Research Publishing, 1974); and Alexander Walker, *Rudolph Valentino* (London: Elm Tree, 1976). Two biographies of Jean Harlow, the second much more reputable than the first, are Irving Shulman's *Harlow: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Dell, 1964) and David Stenn's *Bombshell: The Life and Death of Jean Harlow* (New York: Doubleday, 1993). For information on Carole Lombard, see Warren G. Harris, *Gable and Lombard* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) and Robert D. Matzen, *Carole Lombard: A Bio-bibliography* (New York: Greenwood, 1988). A selection of sources on James Dean is as follows: Venable Herndon, *James Dean: A Short Life* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974); Joe Hyams, *James Dean: Little Boy Lost* (New York: Warner, 1992); Donald Spoto, *Rebel: The Life and Legend of James Dean* (New York: Harper, 1996); and John Howlett, *James Dean: A Biography* (London: Plexus, 1997). As with Dean, sources on Marilyn Monroe are legion. They include Norman Mailer, *Marilyn: A Biography* (New York: Grosset, 1973); Robert F. Slatzer, *The Life and Curious Death of Marilyn Monroe* (London: W. H. Allen, 1975); Fred Lawrence Guiles, *Legend: The Life and Death of Marilyn Monroe* (New York: Stein, 1984); Gloria Steinem, *Marilyn* (New York: Holt, 1986); and Carole Nelson Douglas, ed., *Marilyn: Shades of Blonde* (New York: Forge, 1997).

3. Wed at the age of sixteen to a wealthy young man named Charles McGrew, Carpenter came to Los Angeles to set up household with him. Waiting for a friend on a movie set, she attracted the notice of three Fox executives, who gave her letters of introduction to Fox and the Central Casting Bureau. She applied at Central Casting, where she gave her name as "Jean Harlow," her mother's maiden name. Calls to work as an extra soon followed, but Carpenter ignored them until her controlling mother urged her to accept the offers. It was the first step toward a now-legendary career.

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