**Video Script**

**Lecture 10 – Stars, Pt. 2**

**Welcome**

In our last lecture, we talked all about the business rationale for stars. We thought a little bit like a studio head. Why would we put a star in a movie? What good would it do? What harm might it cause? We also used Richard Dyer’s ideas to think about stars from an audience’s perspective—that we interact with them as symbols and images, not really as people. Today, I want to think about studio era actors as *workers*. What was it like to be a person trying to make a living in the early days of Hollywood? And what could you do if the system had limited or no use for you?

**Key Terms**

Here are your key terms for today.

**The Star System**

If we’re thinking about stars as laborers, the place for us to start is with the concept of *the star system*. This a term you might have heard before. For our purposes **[ANIMATION]** the star system refers to the way studios during the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s (and by decreasing degrees thereafter) made stars. Key strategies employed by studios as part of the star system were signing big stars to exclusive contracts, manufacturing personas for them—think snake-eating Theda Bara—disseminating fabricated publicity about them, and hiding their real private lives. These strategies were not applied to all actors, however; they were reserved for those on the tippy-top of an enormous labor pool. So, before we get there, let’s start with the workers at the bottom.

**Hierarchy**

For this lecture, I’m drawing heavily on an article by a film historian named Sean P. Holmes. He read hundreds of letters written to the Actors Equity Association and the Academy to learn about their experiences on sets from the 1910s to the 1930s. So, virtually all the big chunks of text you see in the first half of this lecture are his work, not mine! Credit where credit is due.

Holmes stresses that while A-list stars might have been the most visible workers in early Hollywood, the most numerous were **[ANIMATION]** hopeful masses who struck out to the West Coast from all over the country be in the pictures.

**Extras**

In part, these migrants arrived in Hollywood fueled by that myth of discovery we were talking about in the last lecture. Who *doesn’t* love to think that a mogul might stumble on us going about our business in the grocery store, see our undeniable charm, and cast us in a movie immediately? **[ANIMATION]** Holmes says:

*Inspired by a discourse of modern stardom which identified “personality” and a natural affinity with the camera as the keys to screen success, thousands of would-be motion picture performers made their way to Hollywood in the 1910s and 1920s, the majority with no acting experience whatsoever. By film historian Kevin Brownlow’s estimate, their chances at finding jobs in the studios were no better than one in a hundred.*

So, the discourse, or the conversation, around stardom during the 1910s and 1920s made it seem like anyone with a photogenic face and a gleam in their eye had all they needed to make it in the business. Of course, that was not true.

**Hierarchy (continued)**

One step above the hopefuls we have scores of people who managed to land intermittent work as **[ANIMATION]** extras and bit players who were paid next to nothing. This type of work was contingent and precarious. Even if you secured a position as an extra, you might lose that job in the blink of an eye on a director’s whim, if the studio wanted to cut costs, or if the star of the film got injured.

**Intolerance**

This is a still from the set of D.W. Griffith’s 1916 film *Intolerance*, the one that’s currently sitting on the AFI Greatest Films list. You can see the enormous number of extras in this shot. **[EXTRAS]** All of these extras were paid just $1.25 per day, a small travel allowance, and lunch. Holmes found evidence that many of these extras were struggling so mightily to find work that they lived at or below the poverty line, and that while they could not live on $1.25 per day, the lunch was a critical part of their compensation. He includes in his article this story **[ANIMATION],** from D.W. Griffith’s assistant director. Talking about when the food was delivered to the set, and he said:

*When the trucks came on, they’d make a run for it, yelling “Hey, Lunch! Lunch!” and you couldn’t control them. They’d grab their lunches and their milk and, oh boy, they were happy with that. I had noticed one old guy who always seemed to get away from the rest after he’d got his lunchbox. He’d go over to where we had a kind of canvas fence surrounding the property, the barrier that kept the public out and he’d sit on the ground. I couldn’t figure out what was going on over there—until one day I strolled over to the point where I could see both sides of the fence. And there, on the other side, was his poor old wife. He was passing part of his lunch to her under the fence.*

I’m sorry for sharing a story that is basically, like, a heart-breaking Pixar short, but I think it’s important to recognize how *most* actors in the studio system struggled. There are some other stories he includes, too, like a gaunt actress at an audition stealing a fistful of mints because she was starving. To try to succeed in this business was both a full-time occupation and a mostly uncompensated one.

Further, bit players would sometimes be manipulated into doing more than the work they were being paid for. Sometimes they’d hire you as an extra, and then give you a few speaking lines. This *should* have earned you more money, but if you’re an actor trying to get your foot in the door, what do you do? Do you get your face out there and go hungry? Or do you refuse…and most likely get fired altogether?

**Hierarchy (continued)**

If we go one run up the ladder from extras, we hit supporting actors and character actors. These folks were better compensated than bit players, and popular character actors could actually command a large fee or a large salary for their work. Still, there were ways the system could squeeze them for extra profit.

**Wedgewood Nowell**

This gentleman is a character actor by the name of Wedgewood Nowell; not a well-known name, by any means, but a working actor. In 1924, he wrote a letter to the Actors Equity Association, a union for theater actors based in New York, in which he asked for advice about what he saw as unethical filmmaking practices designed to keep actors from making what they were due. He described a process he called “rotation shooting.” He says **[ANIMATION]**

*Here’s the way it works. The various ‘sets’ in the picture are erected in such an order as to permit the studio to absolutely ‘clean up’ all scenes with a given actor or actress who receives, say, $2,900 weekly. This player is ‘railroaded’ right through those sets which are ready and waiting—and as night is turned into day and the player simply rushed from one set to another from eight-thirty or nine a.m. until eight, nine, or ten p.m. or as much later as the player will stand for.*

So what he’s saying here is that they’d call in the character actor who made the most money and make them shoot all their scenes on one grueling day. Then **[ANIMATION]**

*…just as they are concluding the scenes with the $2,900 player, then and only then do they start the next highest player.*

So, they squeeze in the scenes where the highest paid person works with the next highest paid, and then they cycle that second actor through all of *their* scenes. He goes on to say **[ANIMATION]:**

*Now sometimes the scenario is so constructed that it is impossible to overlap the players…well, the player instead of being told to rest (and draw salary) is told that he is ‘finished with the picture’ and that “perhaps there will be a few added scenes or retakes a little later...”*

This was the part that really made actors angry. Studios would say actors were done with the film to avoid paying them for a full week, even though they knew full well that there were more scenes they needed an actor to shoot. Then they would call an actor back in for “reshoots,” a.k.a., the rest of their scenes. It saved the studios tons of money, but actors weren’t making what they deserved, nor could they take other jobs while they waited to be called in. Studios would even ask them not to shave their beards or change their hair in that unpaid downtime.

Nowell also reported that sometimes a studio would dupe an actor into working on two movies in the same day, for no more pay! When a character actor finished their shooting day, someone from the studio would “wander in” talking about how another movie had been shut down because an actor had “gotten sick,” and *oh gee, you’d be great for the part, would you mind being a sport?*

**Star Hierarchy (continued)**

Finally, at the top of the show business food pyramid, we get the delicious sugary trans fat that is **[ANIMATION]** your A-list stars. These were the folks who signed to long term, exclusive contracts with a single studio. These were also the folks who made the most money from the star system, and whose images were most manicured by it.

**Mary Pickford**

Mary Pickford, who we talked about during the last lecture as the ingenue, made a *ton* of money during the late teens and early twenties. **[ANIMATION]** In 1918, she signed a contract with a studio for an annual salary of $675,000 for three years, and on top of that she earned *fifty percent* of the profits on her films. Fifty percent! Pickford is a bit of a unique case because she was seen as *such* a powerful box office draw that studios were willing to extend a percentage of their profits…

**Norma Talmadge**

…but there were other very highly paid stars at the top of the pyramid, too. **[ANIMATION]** Norma Talmadge, another actress who you see here, commanded a salary of $10,000 per week in 1923.

**Knapp & LaRoy**

Now, the money was great—but it didn’t mean life was a breeze, either. Stars, particularly female stars, were held to an extremely high standard of physical beauty. **[ANIMATION]** Evalyn Knapp reported losing a job because of a slight blemish on her face that was caused *by her job*—what she called “grease paint poisoning” from the makeup she was required to wear on camera.

Stars under contract to a studio were also subject to intense pressure to perform on-screen roles and off-screen personas over which they exercised little to no say. **[ANIMATION]** Rita LaRoy, for example, was cast in the uncontroversial and even bland role of a homesteader, but the director of the film demanded she unbutton her dress to reveal her cleavage to the camera. When LaRoy refused, she was ordered off the set.

**Jetta Goudal**

French actress Jetta Goudal serves as kind of an enraging example of how a studio could control a star’s off-screen image, despite her objections, in a way that was detrimental to her career. Paramount Pictures decided that Goudal would play femme fatal roles on screen, and that off-screen they would publish all kinds of stories about her being a raging diva because movie fans *adored* stories about strife behind the scenes. **[ANIMATION]**

*‘They warned me,’ read one 1924 profile* [interviewing one of her co-stars] *that captured the essence of the Goudal persona. ‘They said that the lady was quite electrical and that if I displeased her she was quite liable to plunge a fork into my heart across the dinner table.’*

**[ANIMATION]***Goudal had serious reservations about the extra-filmic identity that the studio created for her. She quickly discovered, however, that her opinions carried little weight. ‘I saw the first story of that type that was ever written,’ she recalled in an interview in the early 1930s. ‘It was while I was at Paramount, and when I objected, horrified, they assured me that it was a swell stunt and would be continued, no matter what my feelings on the subject might be.*

Goudal knew from the beginning that circulating the rumor that she was difficult to work was a dead end. Any valid concerns she raised about her work were grist for the rumor mill. Further, how do you fight with your studio about your reputation for being difficult? It’s like trying to prove you’re sane. It’s rhetorically impossible. The more you object, the more you seemingly prove what they’re saying about you. Goudal changed studios, and for a while she tried to recuperate her own image.

**Maligned!**

I went poking around for Jetta Goudal press and I was actually able to find an article from that short period where she was trying to garner her own positive press. It’s a complicated piece—I’ll add it to your optional links if you’d like to check it out—and it’s almost impossible for me to sort out the publicity from reality. Who knows whether Goudal even ever sat down for this interview, but here’s what the author concludes:

**[ANIMATION]** *She appears to be sincerely hurt—this aloof, compelling Goudal—that people deliberately misrepresent her. And it is quite true. I believe that the criticism aimed at her has been carried beyond the bounds of justification Although she is as proud as Lucifer in her enigmatic shell, I think she wants to be liked…*

**[ANIMATION]** *I am sending form cards to all my friends and acquaintances saying, “How could you be so mistaken about Jetta Goudal? You are wrong, all wrong.”*

**Goudal**

Ultimately, though, Goudal was fired. **[ANIMATION]** She took her studio head, the famed director Cecil B. DeMille, to court and actually *won* the case *and* portion of her unpaid contract, but she was blacklisted from the motion picture business. She went on to become an interior designer.

**Holmes quote**

So, at the end of the day, those at the bottom of the star hierarchy and those at the top made vastly different sums of money, but they were both at the mercy of the studios. The studios had nearly limitless power during this era of film history. And they kept that power by commanding the press. **[ANIMATION]** As Sean Holmes puts it,

*“With unlimited access to the national media, industry leaders could construct screen luminaries in such a way as to strip them of their identity as workers and to obscure the realities of the conditions under which they labored.”*

In other words, part of building a star’s image was hiding the realities of working for a studio—realities that included coercion, poor pay, contract disputes, and other labor issues.

**Question**

**[ANIMATION]** ..but what do you do if the star system has limited space for you because of your *identity?* For the rest of the lecture, I want to talk about two American actresses, women of color, who were so constrained by what the U.S. movie industry had to offer in them in the 1920s and 1930s that they needed to invent a new path for themselves.

**Wong & Baker**

Those women are **[ANIMATION]** Anna May Wong, and **[ANIMATION]** Josephine Baker. Incidentally, your reading for this lecture is a little bit different—it’s actually a series of poems that imagine what it would be like if Wong had a time machine and could see different eras of film, including an imagined conversation with Baker. I wanted to assign these poems to give you a break from the heavy scholarly stuff, and also, I think lots of different kinds of writing can theorize about film and film history. I hope you enjoy them!

**Performing Race and Gender**

Plus, you get to read some poems instead of this very dense theoretical article, which is where I’m drawing a lot of the information in the rest of the lecture, if you’re curious. Credit where credit is due, remember?

**Wong (Early Life)**

**[ANIMATION]** Anna May Wong is born in Los Angeles in 1906, and she’s a third generation Chinese American. She found her way to the film industry by the 1920s, where **[ANIMATION]** she appeared in a number of supporting roles that were highly stereotypical. She was often cast to confer a more ‘authentic’ Chinese touch to the movie.” Why would movies need a more “authentic touch”?

**Oland**

Because *this* is what they looked like. Here’s Swedish-American actor Warner Oland, who played virtually *only* Chinese and Chinese American characters throughout his career.

**Werewolf**

And when I say *only,* I mean it. **[ANIMATION]** Even when he played a werewolf, it was still a fricking Chinese werewolf!

**Charlie Chan**

He played Dr. Fu Manchu—which is where we got the name for the mustache—and he played the infamous detective Charlie Chan in *sixteen movies.* In virtually all of his roles, he wore yellowface makeup and performed an accent. And this dude made $40,000 per film!

**Oland & Wong**

So, these are the films to which Wong was added as a bit of so-called Chinese authenticity.

**Wong (Timeline)**

**[ANIMATION]** So, frustrated with the roles she was being offered, Wong moved to Europe in 1927. There she was able to play more nuanced leading ladies, though they were still somewhat exoticized. **[ANIMATION]** The roles were always dramatic and often romantic—so they were meatier, they gave her something to work with—but she was always paired with a white male actor.

**Baker (Timeline)**

**[ANIMATION]** Josephine Baker was also born in 1906, though she was born in St. Louis. **[ANIMATION]** By the age of 12, she was doing domestic work for white families, some of whom were quite abusive to her. **[ANIMATION]** She joined a Black touring acting troupe and eventually scored a role in *Shuffle Along*, the first all-Black musical on Broadway. Now, we talked in previous lectures about anti-Black racism during this era—exactly what Oscar Micheaux was talking about in *Within Our Gates*. Baker was frustrated with this, and the lack of career opportunities it caused her, and so she *also* moved to Europe, specifically to France, where she became a superstar of the stage.

**Wong & Baker**

**[ANIMATION]** So, both Wong and Baker are born in the U.S.. **[ANIMATION]** Both Wong and Baker experienced some success in entertainment but were **[ANIMATION]** pigeonholed into roles they saw as limiting and limited based on their identity. **[ANIMATIN]** And both Wong and Baker moved to Europe.

**[ANIMATION]** What we’ll see is that both Wong and Baker were *exoticized* in their roles abroad. But for women who were trying to build a career when so many of their options were constrained, being an exoticized *star* might be preferable to being a stereotyped *bit player*.

**Wong**

**[ANIMATION]** Wong’s press images from Europe often posed her in luxurious Asian-inspired costumes with long red nails, surrounded by Chinese artifacts. **[ANIMATION]** Her star image drew on stereotypes about Asian women, like passivity or the Dragon Lady archetype, but she was also highly sophisticated, cool, and fashionable. She was the height of 1920s style. In terms of her film work, **[ANIMATION]** there’s often a scene where she’s depicted in a revealing, Orientalized costume, or she plays a showgirl who at some point must perform an erotic and supposedly exotic dance. With these bigger roles comes increasing exposure of her body to audiences.

**Baker**

Josephine Baker began her career in France on stage and then moved into film, but **[ANIMATION]** in both capacities she drew on so-called “savage” imagery. **[ANIMATION]** But her performances were ironic, often inspired by drag performers and how they presented gender. She was “less mocking of African dance or culture than deriding her audience’s stereotypes.” **[ANIMATION] “**People think I come from the jungle,” she told an interviewer in 1949. “What people didn’t write! White imagination is really something when it comes to Black people.” So, not *everyone* understood the irony of her performances, but it’s what she intended. **[ANIMATION]** Her total image was seen in Europe as the epitome of *modernity*.

I’ve included for you in the clips for this lecture some footage of Anna May Wong in one of her British films, as well as one of Baker’s dancing clips. There’s lots more of Baker especially on YouTube.

**Politics (Wong)**

Finally, both women used the freedom they found in Europe to leverage their voices for political causes related to their racial identity in the United States. **[ANIMATION]** When Wong returned to the United States in the 1940s, she couldn’t marry the man she loved because of miscegenation laws, and she had a hard time finding a place to live in Los Angeles because of her race. **[ANIMATION]** But she increasingly explored her Chinese American identity, saying she felt she was “growing more Chinese with each passing year.” **[ANIMATION]** She did face some backlash from both the Chinese government and Chinese Americans about her films, which they said were stereotypical; she apologized and criticized the industry for offering her such narrow roles. **[ANIMATION]** And finally, she became a vocal advocate for China after it was invaded by Japan in 1939. She also went to Beijing to make her own documentary about the country.

**Politics (Baker)**

**[ANIMATION]** As for Baker, she too received some pushback from her community throughout her career. She eventually distanced herself from her early, boundary pushing, ironic stage persona. She was quoted as saying she rarely experienced racism in France, to which the *Chicago Defender*, a Black U.S. paper, responded “she should stop and consider what France is doing to some 45 million negroes in its colonies.”

**[ANIMATION]** During WWII, Baker joined the French Resistance. She carried messages written in invisible ink on her sheet music and images of German military installations in her underwear as she moved about the continent; she also concealed weapons and Jewish refugees at her chateau. After the war, she was awarded the *croix de guerre,* a military award, for her efforts.

**[ANIMATION]** When she did visit the United States intermittently throughout the 1950s, she refused to play in segregated venues. This brought her into the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, and in fact she spoke before Martin Luther King Jr. at the 1968 March on Washington.

**Baker**

So, what does this all add up to? We’ve spent the last two days considering how and why stars became foundational to the motion picture industry, but because of Hollywood’s highly circumscribed roles for women of color, both Anna May Wong and Josephine Baker needed to find another way. As Jean Francoise-Staszak puts it in his article, **[ANIMATION] “**Wong and Baker reached stardom in spite of their ethnicity but also because of it.” These women knew that race *means different things in different places*, and they chose to reject what little the U.S. star system had to offer them and build their own star images elsewhere, where their bodies and identities resonated differently.

*This is not to say* that Wong and Baker didn’t experience bias, or that their bodies weren’t displayed, exoticized, and consumed, because they were. Rather, their choices point to the concept…

**Agency**

Of agency. Agency is the ability to act freely in the social world, though this concept is usually paired with the concept of structure, or the social constraints that limit individual choices. Some actors in the studio era used their agency to climb the star system as high as it would let them go, whether that was surviving on D.W. Griffith’s sandwiches or taking home half a movie’s box office receipts. As women of color with structurally limited options, Wong and Baker used their agency to reject the star system entirely and find another path to practice their art, however flawed that path might have been.