**Video Script**

**Lecture 9 – Stars (Part 1)**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

Are you ready for your closeup, friends? Because for the next two lectures, we’re going to be talking about stars. Stardom is so tightly woven into how we think about movies, it’s hard to believe that there was a time when movie stars were *not* a given. Yet, there was.

**Norma Desmond gifs**

I’ve started this lecture with some images from a 1950 film noir called *Sunset Boulevard*, directed by Billy Wilder. If you haven’t seen it, I cannot recommend it enough—it’s one of my all-time favorites. In it, the real-life former silent film actress Gloria Swanson plays a fictional former silent film actress named Norma Desmond, so their careers sort of parallel each other. Norma (the character), though, refuses to accept her own irrelevance in the 1950s film business. She is the prototypical movie star inflated to nightmarish proportions—dramatic, preening, self-absorbed, vain, insecure, performative, and ultimately delusional and dangerous (though I won’t spoil the film). I’m starting my lecture by mentioning the iconic Norma Desmond because on the one hand, she’s a character that was manufactured to be a silent, studio-era star, which is exactly what we’ll look at today. But on the other hand, she’s also a character that has to wrangle with the indignity of her own disposability when the industry finds more bankable bodies. She’s a reminder that above all, film stars were—and are—a *business strategy that must be carefully implemented* every bit as much as they are an organic phenomenon.

Norma Desmond gifs, incidentally, are some of the best gifs out there. This “*Shut up, I’m rich*” one is what goes through my mind after payday when I spring for guac at Chipotle.

**Key concepts**

Here are your key concepts for today.

**What is a star?**

The first thing we need to figure out **[ANIMATION]** is what the heck a star even *is*. Think of a star. What do you think of? Is it someone in a glittery gown on a red carpet? Is it a bunch of flashing paparazzi cameras? Is it someone wearing big sunglasses walking through LAX airport? Are you thinking of a particular person?

**Richard Dyer**

To think through what a star is, I’m going to be drawing heavily on the work of a scholar named Richard Dyer. For decades, he’s written about what stars are and their cultural uses and meanings.

**[ANIMATION]** And Richard Dyer says, first and foremost, that stars aren’t people—they’re images and they’re symbols. He says:

*“…the fact that they are also real people is an important aspect of how they signify, but we never know them directly as real people, only as they are to be found in media texts.”*

Think of a star as a product that’s made out of a person, and a bunch of other ingredients.

**The Rock (Hobbs & Shaw)**

So, the Rock is this: a larger than life personality who stars in films like *Hobbs & Shaw*.

**The Rock (Paparazzi)**

The Rock is also a person who exists in out of character.

**Dyer (continued)**

But what Dyer is saying is that stars might mean an awful lot in our culture and in our lives, but we interact with them as symbols, not as people. We may “see” Dwayne Johnson on big screens and small screens, performing characters and performing himself, but we don’t go to Whataburger with the Rock. We don’t text with him. We don’t really know him as a person, even when he’s not in a role.

**[ANIMATION]** Stars are, more specifically, *ideological* images. To understand what he means, we need another definition.

**Ideology**

Ideology is “the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live.” A great example of an ideology is “the American dream.” That everyone in America can go out, work hard, earn a living, achieve their goals, and even make it big is a very powerful ideology in this country. You might agree with it or disagree with it, but even disagreeing with it recognizes that the American Dream is a commonly understood idea, right?

**Dyer (continued)**

Dyer goes on to argue that stars “function crucially in contradictions with and between ideologies, which they seek variously to manage or resolve.” Now, what the heck does *that* mean?

**Clara Bow**

For an example, we can turn to the star of this week’s screening, one silent film star named Clara Bow. Bow became a star during the 1920s and symbolized…

**New Woman**

…the “New Woman” ideology, or the young lady who leaves home, has a single life, lives with friends, gets a job, wears shorter skirts, goes dancing etc. Think of a flapper, if you know that term. The New Woman ideology clashed…

**Older woman**

…with older ideas of proper womanhood—I should specify here, *white* womanhood. Those older ideas said what young women should do is stay home, cultivate domestic skills, and get married.

**Clara Bow (again)**

When Dyer says that stars can help manage contradictions between ideologies, what he means is that when the movies presented Clara Bow is a symbol of the “New Woman,” people got to argue about her, and react to her, and use her as an example to negotiate their feelings about how gender roles were changing.

**Dyer (continued)**

Okay, but back to the definition of stars. **[ANIMATION]** Richard Dyer says that there are four key things to understand about a star’s image. **[ANIMATION]** First and foremost, a star image has to be *made.* It’s a product! Remember, people are just one ingredient the film industry uses to produce a star.

**Schwabs**

And yet, we love this idea that stars are discovered, fully intact. There’s an infamous Hollywood legend about this pharmacy/lunch counter, Schwab’s, which was popular because of its proximity to all of the studios.

**Lana Turner**

Supposedly, a major star of the 1940s named Lana Turner was just “discovered” there one day. The truth is, of course, much more complex—a Hollywood reporter saw her at a different lunch counter, referred to other people, who helped her become a protegee of powerful film industry movers and shakers, who molded and bleached her into a pin-up beauty, and the *result of all this work* is the star that was supposedly “discovered.” They might have discovered a person, but a lot of people made the star. Does that make sense?

**Dyer (continued)**

Okay, second, **[ANIMATION],** a star’s image is extensive, multimedia, and intertextual. Meaning that a star’s image is made up of the combined effect of their films, promotion, publicity, press coverage, criticism, images, discourse, and more!

**Beyonce**

Just to illustrate a little bit, let’s take Beyonce. Her star image is the combined result of, among other things, her albums and films, [**ANIMATION], [ANIMATION]** her live shows, recorded live performances, and behind the scenes footage, **[ANIMATION]** her publicity and public relations, her merchandise, and even the way the Beyhive talks about her. Extensive, multimedia, and intertextual.

**Dyer (continued)**

Third, **[ANIMATION]**, stars are involved in making themselves into commodities. I love how Dyer puts it—he says stars are both the labor and the thing that labor produces. What does that mean? Well, this is what I was saying about a person being just one ingredient of a star. There’s a human, of course, but there’s a lot of work that turns a human into a star. That work might look like acting classes and media training and make-up, hair, and wardrobe styling, and physical training, and dieting, and plastic surgery, and publicity, and doing interviews, and a cultivated social media presence, and on and on and on.

**The Rock, again**

In other words, Dwayne Johnson and others did a lot of work to become the star of the film *Skyscraper*. And that work becomes more visible when revisit this 100% perfect photograph of the Rock in high school **[ANIMATION].**

**Dyer (continued)**

And finally, the most important point about stars **[ANIMATION].** *Stars are made for profit.* They are a way to sell films, but also newspapers and magazines, fashion, books, cars, and just about anything else under the sun.

**Pause**

Okay, let’s pause and think for a moment. **[ANIMATION.]** Imagine you are a big-time Hollywood film director working on your latest project. What are some advantages of casting a big name star in your film? And what are some disadvantages?

**Pause (2)**

Take 30 seconds to jot down a few ideas. **[PLAY YOUTUBE.]**

**Positives and negatives**

Here are some that I was able to think of. **[ANIMATION]** In terms of advantages, familiar faces can always help draw audiences. Getting a powerful star in your movie can also make it seem like your studio is powerful. Good rapport between a star and a creative team can sometimes result in a better product. There’s lots of examples of this, like Tim Burton and Johnny Depp, or the crew of actors who always appear in Wes Anderson projects. If you’re a smaller studio, director, or producer, attaching a star to your project can help add both legitimacy and money—it’s much easier to fund a film with a big name attached. Interesting casting can be a surprise and a delight, attracting attention to your film. The example I’ve talked about with a few students this semester is Adam Sandler in *Uncut Gems*. We tend to think of Sandler as a goofball, but once every decade or so he does a serious film where he excels in a totally different way. Entertainment press coverage of your star can sometimes drive interest, like if a star goes really “method,” like several actors who played the Joker. Same for actors who undergo a dramatic bodily transformation, like Kumail Nanjiani getting buff for a Marvel film. People love a comeback story; Robert Downey Jr. is a great example of a star who made a comeback after addiction derailed his career. And finally, as we all know, star-heavy films can become profitable franchises. If people turn up to see your star once, it’s a good bet they’ll turn up again to see them again and again.

**[ANIMATION]** On the negative side of things, when a star is typecast it might make your film seem predictable. See: all of Adam Sandler’s other films besides *Uncut Gems.* Choosing a big name over an unknown might mean that you’re not picking the person who’s truly best for a role. In terms of really big stars, they have a lot of power! You might need to concede some things to a star, like money, creative control, schedule, etc. Stars also come with their image intact, which can sometimes break the fantasy of a film or program for viewers. I’m watching a show right now called *Lodge 49*, which is absolutely wonderful, and one of the best parts about it is that I don’t know many of the performers. It’s a rare thing to encounter these characters without any preconceived notions, and I didn’t realize how much that helps immerse me in a story. And finally, stars who have controversies before, during, and even after you cast them will affect how your film is received. Think about how differently we view movies or shows with stars with #metoo allegations circulating about them.

**Who’s she?**

Okay. Now we know a little bit about what a star is and how the film and media industries use them to make profits. But we also know that Thomas Edison didn’t credit his actors. So…where did movie stars come from? The answer starts here, with the woman in this film still. **[ANIMATION]** Audiences loved to see her in one-reel films, but at first, no one was quite sure who she was.

**Biograph Girl**

She was known, until about 1910, as “The Biograph Girl,” because she appeared in a lot of films for the Biograph film company. Movies made audiences feel closer to performers than they ever had before. They could see their faces much more clearly blown up on a screen than they could in live theater, where they might just be a little speck on a stage. The Biograph Girl wasn’t credited by name, but audiences recognized her across different films and began to write about her in very early fan magazines. So, who was the Biograph girl?

**Lawrence/Laemmle/Ad**

Her name was Florence Lawrence. **[ANIMATION]** As it became clear to her and her actor husband that she was drawing audiences to her films, they began to put pressure on Biograph to treat her better and pay her more. This resulted in the both of them being fired in 1910. **[ANIMATION]** Enter our old friend Carl Laemmle, film exhibitor, independent film producer, and marketing rascal. He hires Lawrence immediately. Then **[ANIMATION]** he circulates a rumor that she had been flattened by a streetcar in St. Louis and was dead as a doornail. RIP Florence. Then, **[ANIMATION]** he exposes the lie in ad in the early film magazine *Motion Picture World.* But he doesn’t say that *he* circulated the rumor…he blames it on “enemies of IMP,” and I think we can read between the lines and understand this to be a dig at Edison. The ad says:

*The blackest and at the same time the silliest lie yet circulated by enemies of the “Imp” was the story foisted on the public of St. Louis last week to the effect that Miss Lawrence (the “Imp” girl, formerly known as the “Biograph” girl) had been killed by a street car. It was a black lie because it was so cowardly. It was a silly lie because it was so easily disproved. Miss Lawrence was not even in a street-car accident, is in the very best of health, will continue to appear in “Imp” films, and very shortly some of the best work of her career is to be released.*

He then goes on to plug her upcoming films, including one called “The Broken Bath,” which is actually a typo! The film is called “The Broken Oath.” Following her seemingly miraculous resurrection, Lawrence goes on what’s considered the first publicity tour in film history, beginning in St. Louis, the supposed scene of her demise. After Laemmle’s stunt in 1910, stars become the studios’ biggest assets. Their personas become a way to organize production and marketing of films. For the rest of the lecture, I want to talk about a few on-screen “types” that become popular during the transitional and early studio era—types that are so enduring, I’m sure you can think of stars today whose images are still shaped by them

**Pickford/Fairbanks**

First, the *ingenue,* or a girl or young woman who is endearingly innocent. **[ANIMATION]** During the early studio era, Mary Pickford was screen’s foremost ingenue. She was known as America’s Sweetheart and The Girl with the Curls, and she often played a sweet, romantic lead. Think of her like an early Reese Witherspoon. On the other side **[ANIMATION]** we’ve got Douglas Fairbanks, who was one of our first all-American action heroes. He’s often described as a *swashbuckler*, a heroic archetype that’s usually swinging around, using a sword, being chivalrous. Believe it or not, you can draw a line from this kind of bland, potato-y guy to The Rock and other chiseled action heroes of the present day. **[ANIMATION]** Pickford and Fairbanks were superstars, some of the most famous actors of silent film. They went on to co-found the United Artists studio, where they hoped actors could exercise more control over their careers, and they were also founding members of the Academy. **[ANIMATION]** Much to fans’ delight, they were also a couple. I’ll include in the optional clips for this module some newsreel footage of their honeymoon in London, where so many fans are following them they can hardly walk.

**Rudolph Valentino**

In the early studio era, producers also find that there’s a lot of money to be made off slightly exoticized male stars who embody or approximate the so-called “Latin lover” type. Perhaps the most famous is Rudolph Valentino, pictured here. **[ANIMATION]** Valentino was Italian, which in that era and using a bit of movie magic, gets interpreted as an exotic but alluring “other.” He often played Latino and Middle Eastern characters, and many of his film roles are painfully stereotypical. The key to Valentino’s charm is how he offered a different kind of sensual masculinity—he’s not the type to swashbuckle you a way from a villain, he’s more the type to tango with you until you swoon. And, in fact, he was a dancer as well as an actor. People often use this phrase to talk about Valentino, that women adored him and men hated him, which I’ll include here with a couple of asterisks. First, I mean, more than just women loved him, we didn’t invent gay people in the 1990s. And second, by men often hated him, I think what they mean is that he was threatening to white masculinity of the era. When I think about Valentino, I think a lot about Prince. He too embodied an alternative, non-white masculinity that was sensual, physical, musical, and even kind of feminine. My mom *loved* Prince. Thus, my dad *hated* Prince. The other thing about Valentino is that he died quite young, at just 31 years old. I’ll include in your optional clips some newsreel of his funeral and the throngs of fans crowding the street outside.

**Ramon Novarro**

Many of these sort of exoticized male heartthrobs/Latin Lovers were not in any way Latin, but I did want to mention at least one Mexican star of the era. Ramon Novarro sort of took on the mantle of Hollywood’s Latin Lover after Valentino’s death. Novarro is, to me, a deeply tragic figure. He was gay, but he couldn’t be out in that era when his image was controlled by the studios, and he was murdered in 1968 in really sad circumstances. I mention this just to highlight how constrained actors were by the studio system, and also to remind us that queer people have always been part of our media industry, even when they weren’t permitted much visibility.

**Sessue Hayakawa**

Again, most of our early studio-era male heartthrobs were white, but not all. Sessue Hayakawa was a Japanese immigrant who went to the University of Chicago, where it’s said he studied economics and was the quarterback of the football team. He eventually found himself out in Hollywood and began acting, first in theater and then in films, where he was typecast as a sexy, brooding, mostly villainous leading man. If he wasn’t cast as a hot villain, he was cast as a “forbidden lover.” He was a huge star, our first Asian leading man, and he commanded a big salary. But the “forbidden lover” trope fell out of favor after a while, and the advent of sound saw his roles narrow even further because he spoke English with an accent. This is a common story, and one we’ll hear more about next week. So, he took his career abroad where he could act in more varied capacities. After WWII he did make appearances in a few U.S. films, most notably his role in *Bridge on the River Kwai* in 1957, for which he received an Oscar nomination.

**[ANIMATION]** Doing a little research, I was able to find this article about Hayakawa in *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1929. I’m fascinated by this section at the bottom. The writer asks asks:

*“Why did you leave the movies?” He looked somewhat startled by the direct question. He stared a moment, and then gazed off into space, as though turning the question over in his mind. After a moment, hesitantly and as if temporizing, he replied: “Perhaps several reasons contributed. I did not like the stories I was required to play in.”*

I’m happy I found this article because it gives me the same feeling I got reading those 1915 news articles about Black people protesting *Birth of a Nation*. It’s a powerful thing to see how folks a hundred years ago were resisting the limitations they faced based on their identity. And, if we know how to do the research, we can find proof like this, in black and white.

**Chaplin/Keaton**

I want to touch briefly on two megastars of early comedy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton. Early and transitional film was filled with slapstick comedy—but these two were doing something innovative with the form.

**The Three Stooges**

Slapstick films often utilized this undercranked camera technique, which made it look like people were running around really fast. Slapstick was full of people getting kicked in the nuts, poked in the eyes, slipping on a banana peel—it’s cheap, physical comedy played for easy laughs. The Three Stooges are a great example of pure slapstick, if you have ever heard of them.

**Chaplin/Keaton**

While Chaplin and Keaton have different styles, what brings them together is how they turned slapstick comedy into something more nuanced than just *guy falls down and goes boom.*

**[ANIMATION]** Chaplin was best known for his iconic “Tramp” character, pictured here in his bowler hat, tiny jacket, and oversized pants. The Tramp had a personality. He gained audience empathy because he was often an underdog—usually romantically—and Chaplin used more nuanced filmmaking like close-ups to make him more relatable. Though there are brilliant physical gags in his films, they’re used to tell a story and any cartoonish violence is usually directed towards someone who deserves it.

**Chaplin directing**

It’s also worth noting that Chaplin was another co-founder of United Artists, which gave him an unprecedented amount of control over his films from 1919 on. He was a maniacal director who could often be quite abusive to those he worked with—as well as the much, much younger women he was involved with romantically. This is just to say that his reputation as a brilliant comedy auteur rests on power he marshalled in unkind, and sometimes unethical, ways.

**Chaplin/Keaton**

**[ANIMATION]** On the other hand, you’ve got Buster Keaton, known as the Great Stone Face. His performance is characterized by his *lack* of reaction to the bizarre circumstances that surround him. Keaton got his start in vaudeville where he had an act with his family. He was really acrobatic, and the act featured him getting tossed around and thrown into the orchestra pit. As quite a young age, it dawned on him that people were disturbed when he, this little kid, crawled up out of the pit and made a big show of being okay—it made it feel like it was a mistake, and it made the audience worry he’d get hurt. But, if he stood up after a big fall and just did *nothing*, he got a huge laugh.

**Sherlock Jr.**

I’m going to include a silent comedy I adore, a two-reel Buster Keaton film called *Sherlock Jr.,* in your optional links if you’d like to check him out. It’s half an hour well-spent, I promise.

**Theda Bara**

Finally, the last star that we’ll talk about today is the *vamp*, which was embodied first and perhaps even best by the one and only Theda Bara. She was star of transitional and early studio era silent films from about 1914 until the mid-20s, so a relatively short career. The *vamp* is the dark inverse of the ingenue—she’s the ruthless, calculating, maneater with no shame, who’ll do anything she wants for pleasure. As you can see from this picture, she’s also a great deal of fun.

**Theda Bara (continued)**

I saved Bara for last because the rumors about her were *the best*. They were doing the most with ol’ Theda. **[ANIMATION]** Early press about Bara noted that her name was an anagram for ARAB DEATH which certainly meant….SOMETHING…? They said she was born in the Sahara desert and her father was a sheik. Or was he an Italian sculptor? Doesn’t matter! The press reported both, but who cares! Her mother was said to be…a French woman! Sacre bleu! They said she worshipped different gods and ate live snakes, and she sort of cultivated this gothic image by wearing black velvet dresses to all her interviews. She was known as a “strange, wild woman” who, on screen, was famous for her revealing costumes. I’ll link you to one of her few films that still exist, called *A Fool There Was* from 1919. I recommend you watch the first few minutes, where she crushes a rose into blood, and the scene around 56:00 where she shows up and her pathetic suitor practically dies from being so in love with her and she laughs.

**[ANIMATION]** In reality, Theda Bara was Theodosia Goodman, from Ohio, who went to the University of Cincinnati and retired from acting in 1926 to live a very normal life and was just 100% regular American lady.

**Bara Article**

For this lecture, I’ve asked you to read a remarkable star profile of Theda Bara published in *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1920. The author, Agnes Smith, is wrestling with how to write about an actress whose public persona was so obviously fabricated. To me, this piece is evidence that people didn’t buy these stories hook line and sinker, but that they served as a sort of reality show where they got to suspend their disbelief to enjoy the drama. In the article, Smith says:

***[ANIMATION]*** *Somehow, when you meet her personally at a press-agent-less interview, you find yourself being shocked at the enormity of the hoax on the public and yet condoning the woman who, almost in spite of herself, permitted it.*

**Bara Article (continued)**

She ends by saying:

*Her sense of humor is her saving grace. Perhaps it was cruel of her to laugh during all those years, but if she hadn’t she would have emerged an impossible person—much worse than a vampire. After all, she was ridiculous—a sacrifice to the Great God Bunk on the altar of publicity. And I am glad she laughed.*

Here, way back in 1920, Smith seems to acknowledge all of the things Richard Dyer theorized decades and decades later. Theda Bara was *made*. And Smith is ultimately happy that Bara laughed because it’s better than buying her own press, believing her own hype. The star that can’t laugh might turn out to be something much worse…a Norma Desmond.