

Identity under the Guise of Celebrity

Hollywood

Hollywood

WITH ESSAYS BY

Fred Fehlau

Anne Friedberg

Michael Lassell

A N D

David Robbins

CURATED BY

Fred Fehlau

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Front cover:

CINDY SHERMAN, *Untitled Film Still (#52--on bed in slip)*, 1979

Back cover:

PAUL HESSE, *Marlene Dietrich*, 1950

Fame and the Frame

BY ANNE FRIEDBERG



ONE OF THE KEY PLEASURES of cinema spectatorship is the confusing blur of self and other, the projective fantasy of identification with a fictive screen world and its inhabitants. But in Los Angeles, where celebrity merges with the everyday, this frame of representation is gone. Madonna sits in the back of my neighborhood cafe, Michael Douglas stands next to me waiting for his table at a restaurant on La Brea Avenue. Jody Foster soaks nude alongside me in the mineral bath at the Korean spa. While this lack of frame would seem, at first, to be a satisfying inclusion in the fictive and fantasmatic realm, it soon becomes disturbing—a transgression of important boundaries. We need to have the frame implied in order to maintain physical and psychic distance, to reassure us of our difference and to allow us to fantasize our similarity. Our identities are challenged by proximity to this imaginary celestial order.

Two weeks before I moved to Los Angeles I was in a brutal automobile crash—a traumatic form of epistemological break. In a sudden mangle of glass and steel, I went through the windshield. It was as if I had to go through that glass in order to live in Los Angeles. Normally, the windshield acts as a corrective lens framing the world as it reels by and as a transparent protective skin that keeps us from entering the frame. Once I found myself on the other side, inside the frame, reality and fantasy slid into each other in a peculiarly confusing blur.

The frame of the photograph, like the frame of the screen, offers a window onto an absent, mystified world. The virtual gaze of photography supplants, in Roland Barthes's terms, the "here-now" with the "having-been-there."¹ The viewer re-captures the gaze of the photographer, but in virtual fashion; the pleasure is being both *there* and *not there*, a split position of virtual closeness and real distance. Hollywood portrait photography relies on this paradox. A photo of a film star can provide a privileged view of celebrity, but in a different frame, off-screen. Artists who take on a critical or analytic relation to this style of portraiture and its subjects often address the reformulated referentiality that this re-framing implies. Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, for example, follow the codes of Hollywood still portraiture, that of a star caught in the frame of the everyday. In Sherman's work, the viewer recognizes not the celebrity but the codes of celebrity. Recognition follows a tacit formal contract; the frame itself can feign fame.

So there I was in critical condition with a serious head injury until, as mysterious as it still seems, I returned from comatose near-death to what could only be described as near-life in L.A. I was in post-traumatic shock, but also in a form of culture shock. Shards of glass kept coming out of my skin, rising to the surface like diamonds that couldn't be digested by the flesh. There was too much sunshine, everything was too clean, colors were too bright. I kept trying to see Los Angeles as if it were Hollywood in black and white. I recuperated at my partner's family home, one of those capacious Hancock Park houses surrounded by palm trees but designed to look like a Tudor cottage in the Cotswolds. On the other side of the backyard hedge, I

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was told, was the site of the house from *Sunset Boulevard*, that "great big white elephant of a place" with its pool where Mabel Normand and John Gilbert, Wilma Bankey, and Rod LaRocque "must have swum ten thousand midnights ago." *Sunset Boulevard* had always been, for me, the Urtext of Hollywood celebrity, chronicling how the fragile veneer of Norma Desmond's "celluloid self" rotted and sagged with time. Even though I knew that the house in the film wasn't actually on *Sunset Boulevard* and was, rather, a Getty-owned mansion that Billy Wilder rented for the film with the promise of building a pool; and even though I knew the house was torn down in the 1960s, this knowledge did little to alter the cinematic space eidetically etched in my memory. The image of its black and white swimming pool kept floating in my imagination in the intangible way of all movie images. The back hedge of the house in *Sunset Boulevard* was now a place where the dog barked at night as if he were calling across the lawns to ghosts that swam there thousands of nights before. *Sunset Boulevard* was just as far and just as close as it had ever been.

RE: COGNITION

In a 1935 essay, "The Scopophilic Instinct and Identification," Otto Fenichel described the unconscious components of visual scrutiny: "In the unconscious, *to look at an object* may mean various things, the most noteworthy of which are as follows: *to devour the object looked at, to grow like it* (be forced to imitate it) or, conversely, *to force it to grow like oneself*."² (my emphasis)

The relation between viewing and devouring is consistent with acquisitive forms of incorporation in a consumer economy where desires are elaborated in a system of selling and consumption dependent on the relation between *looking* and *buying* and the indirect desire to possess or incorporate through the eye.

"To grow like it" or "to force it to grow like oneself" are the two directions of identification: introjective (incorporating the other into self) and projective (projecting self onto other). Jacques Lacan described the construction of identity as an intersubjective process based in the misrecognition of an external other, a specular relation he vividly depicted as a *mirror phase*.³ Film theorists have frequently drawn upon this model to explain the interaction between the cinema spectator and the "imaginary signifier" of film. The film star has a complex function in this regard. The screen is not a mirror. As Christian Metz points out, there is one thing that is never reflected in it—the spectator's body.⁴

In the cinema, the spectator does not identify with his or her own image. The pleasure offered is precisely this denial: the star's body is *not* the spectator's body, not his, not hers. Hence, the cinema spectator may enjoy cross-gendered identification, a kind of psychic transvestism based in the play of misrecognition. In addition, as countless films with anthropomorphic but non-human stars attest, any body—monster, animal, or robot from



GLORIA SWANSON
Sunset Boulevard, 1949

Dracula and Frankenstein to Lassie and Benji to Yoda and R2D2—offers an opportunity for identificatory investment, a possible suit for the substitution/misrecognition of self.

And yet the conventions of cinematic representation—scenes cut into establishing shots, medium shots, close-ups—enforce a metonymy of the body: a face, a hand, a leg; all cut up. The film star becomes recognizable and familiar, as just such part-objects transformed into commodities: Garbo's face, Grable's legs, Bacall's voice. Celebrity photographs function as a sort of double fetish: the star is already a fetish object⁵ and, once captured in the frame, the photograph itself becomes a fetish of the second order, entering circulation in a market with the exchange value of capital.

LOS ANGELES AS METAPHOR FOR LOSS OF THE FRAME

Our gaze at the screen is a one-way voyeurism, where we are unseen. Like the windshield, the frame has a protective function. To be looked at by a celebrity is a reversal of the conventions of this gaze; the frame insures that this violation will not occur. And as the list of celebrities from John Lennon to Jody Foster demonstrates, if the protective shield fails, one can pay a perilous price for life in the tabloid panopticon, the fishbowl of fame. As Andy Warhol put it: "If I weren't famous, I wouldn't have been shot for being Andy Warhol."⁶

In an age of simulation where signs of the real substitute for the real itself, the virtual pleasure of being inside the frame is marketed as a commodity. Hollywood Boulevard is lined with stores where you can have your photo taken standing next to a life-sized photo cutout of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, or Ronald Reagan. In the souvenir photograph, it looks as if the long-dead (or near-dead) cardboard star is alive and smiling, right next to you. For Warhol, the erasure of the edges of the frame became a confirming condition of fame. "A good reason to be famous," he wrote in *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, "is so that you can read all the big magazines and know everyone in the stories. Page after page it's just all people that you've met."⁷

Studio tours sell the experience of traveling into recognizable cinematic spaces as if entering the diegetic world of the film. A recent Hollywood joke toys with the boundaries between such commodified forays into fictional worlds and life in the "real" world. If you pay a pricey admission at the Universal Studio Tours, the joke goes, you can brave the heat and danger of a raging fire in *Backdraft*, see people shot at in cars in *Miami Vice*, and experience a 7.1 temblor in *Earthquake*. Or you can live in Los Angeles and get these sensations for free.

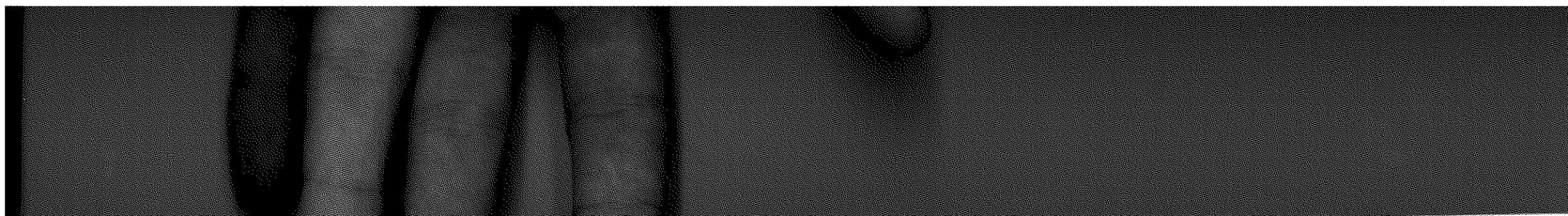
WHAT IS FAMILIAR?

WHAT IS RECOGNIZABLE?

At the end of Sunset Boulevard, Norma Desmond descends the grand staircase of her mansion while the press cameras are rolling. Walking toward a camera in near psychotic glee, she stretches her arms outward and thanks "all those wonderful people out there in the dark." The aging star, Gloria Swanson, in loosely fictional drag as the aging star Norma Desmond, approaches that invisible windshield, claws at the edges of an imaginary signi-



GLORIA SWANSON
AND WILLIAM HOLDEN
Sunset Boulevard, 1949



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fier that traps her on one side of a wide and mystic hedge. She is unable to break through the frame, yet her image will remain in the memories of spectators ten thousand midnights hence.

The cinema spectator, seated in the darkened theater and caught up in this imaginary world, is a psychic repository for fictional characters and their narratives. The celebrity photograph, seen in the full light of a gallery or a magazine page, is representation at one remove. The viewer recognizes a familiar and antecedent signifier—an actor from that movie, a performer from that video, a star from that TV show. The photograph serves as a mnemonic clue, jarring memory into a surge of recognition.

As we stand outside the frame, we are both there and not there, simultaneously drawn into the virtual intimacy of the photographer's gaze and kept at bay by our real distance. The frame is that imposing metaphoric hedge separating us from a powerful imaginary realm full of recognizable yet intangible images.

ANNE FRIEDBERG teaches in the Film Studies Program at the University of California at Irvine. Her book, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern*, published by the University of California Press, will be available in early 1993.

NOTES

¹ Roland Barthes describes the photograph's virtual record as an "illogical conjunction" of spatial immediacy ("here-now") and temporal anteriority ("having-been there"). See Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977): 44-45.

² Otto Fenichel, "The Scopophilic Instinct and Identification," in *Collected Papers of Otto Fenichel, First Series*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1953): 373-397.

³ See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," in *Ecrits*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Tavistock Publications, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1977): 1-7.

⁴ Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*, translated by Ben Brewster (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982).

⁵ In psychoanalytic terminology, fetishism is an object-relation used to disavow the site of sexual difference. To Freud, the discovery of difference is a scenario of the visible where the sight of female genitalia—genitals without a penis—evokes the anxiety of castration for the male. In response to his sight, any form of visual distraction or disguise becomes an eroticized displacement, a fetish. A fetishist object-relation is that of acknowledgment and disavowal (of castration) in constant oscillation. [See Sigmund Freud, "Fetishism (1927)," *Collected Papers*, Volume 5, edited by James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 1959): 198-204.]

Fetishism is more frequently used in its metaphoric capacity, without literal reference to castration. [See Jean Baudrillard, "Fetishism and Ideology: The Semiological Reduction," in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, translated by Charles Levin (St. Louis, MO: Telos Press, 1981).] To Marx, the commodity was also a fetish, its value transformed from a product of labor with a use value to an object in a system of capital with an exchange value. The commodity took on the mystical qualities of a fetish. [See Karl Marx, "The Fetish of the Commodity and its Secret," in *Capital*.] The film star fits these models exactly. As a commodity fetish, the film star is an object with a value beyond its use, and in psychological terms, the star is simultaneously recognized (acknowledged) as other and misrecognized (disavowed) as self.

⁶ Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975): 78.

⁷ Ibid.