Women in the driver’s seat: The auto-erotics of early women’s films

Jennifer Parchesky

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, women drivers of automobiles emerged as signal figures of the ‘New Womanhood’. Freed from both the confines of the domestic sphere and dependence on male drivers, they embodied an autonomous mobility that challenged conventional gender roles. Operating recallant vehicles in often hazardous conditions, early women motorists – especially the celebrated race car drivers and cross-country pioneers – demonstrated ‘masculine’ courage, stamina and technical skill. While such unladylike behavior did not go uncensured, the press and public on the whole celebrated the woman motorist – typically young, affluent and attractive – as a positive symbol of female emancipation. As previous scholars have observed, automobiles figured prominently both in the on-screen exploits of a new breed of action heroines and in off-screen publicity about stars’ personal vehicles, from images of ‘serial queen’ Helen Holmes repairing her own stunt car (infant daughter at her side) to Anita King’s highly publicised Paramount-sponsored transcontinental solo journey in 1915. Yet there are even broader parallels between the pioneering women motorists and the women directors, producers, screenwriters and stars who sat, metaphorically, in the ‘driver’s seat’ of so much of the early film industry. Not only actors but women in all branches of the industry were celebrated in fan magazines, the mainstream press, and even girl’s dime novels as hardworking, technically skilled and courageous, holding their own in a man’s world in conditions that were fast-paced, physically demanding, and subject to all kinds of human and natural disasters. Like women motorists, women directors emphasised the technical demands of their craft – [knowledge of camera operation, of lighting effects, and of all the hundred-and-one less important mechanical details] – even as they insisted that ‘there is no reason why a woman cannot completely master every technicality of the art’. While women in both fields tended to emphasise individual achievements over collective struggle, both motoring and filmmaking were deeply imbricated in the larger feminist movement. Suffragists promoted their cause with both spectacular cross-country automobile tours and stirring propaganda films throughout the 1910s; in 1913, when California women won the vote, director Lois Weber and a coalition of studio women made national headlines by sweeping to victory the nation’s first all-female municipal government in the newly incorporated Universal City. Whether behind the wheel or behind the camera, women’s mastery of exciting new technologies offered a spectacular image of New Womanhood as both practical power and thrilling adventure.

In this essay, I examine three films about female autonomy in which women hold key positions of creative control: Mabel at the Wheel (1914), directed by and starring Mabel Normand; Something New (1915), written, directed, produced by and starring Nell Shipman; and Zander the Great (1920), starring Marion Davies with script and ‘editorial direction’ by Frances Marion. Spanning the heyday of early women’s films, these narratives of female motoring reflect the cultural forces that shaped them.

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powerful women filmmakers to the consolidation of the studio system, these changing representations of women in the driver's seat resonate with the filmmakers' own experiences of empowerment and constraint within the industry. While these films may not have been consciously intended as allegories of their conditions of production, they nevertheless articulate a "political unconscious" in which we can read a larger narrative of the history of first-wave feminism, from the politically-charged "New Womanhood" of the 1910s to a more circumscribed "modern femininity" that conflated liberation with consumer desire and heterosexual romance. While this historical narrative may seem to take a rather depressing turn, my analysis aims to seize the empowering and subversive potentials embedded in these texts, recuperating the work of early women filmmakers as a valuable resource for a contemporary feminist analysis of the dialectics of power and desire. My argument thus participates in the larger struggle of recent feminist film scholarship to reclaim female subjectivity, desire and pleasure from an overly monolithic view of the patriarchal constraints of classical narrative cinema. While such arguments have generally assumed that women viewers must "negotiate" their pleasures in the interstices of the patriarchal text, I focus on the negotiations taking place at the level of both production and discourse, suggesting that these early women's films articulate alternative discourses of female pleasure and agency that defy patriarchal norms. Certainly early women filmmakers were represented in the press as sexually attractive women who drove a car, but the films themselves do not always adhere to the pressures and constraints of a patriarchal society, but they were supported by a widespread popular feminist discourse and the growing importance of the female audience. I contend that these factors, together with the relative fluidity of generic and representational conventions in early cinema, created a far more open field for the articulation of female subjectivities, desires and pleasures.

In defining these representations as "auto-erotic," I connect the eroticisation of female automobility with psychoanalytic and feminist theories of sexuality and subject formation. Early women drivers described their experience in highly erotic terms, citing the "freedom" and "excitement of speed and power as well as the queer intimacy of body and machine: "There is wonderful difference between sitting calmly by while another is driving and actually handling a car herself. There is a feeling of power, of exhilaration, and fascination that nothing else gives powerful heroine, her powerful vehicle, and the creative process of filmmaking as a nexus of autoerotic pleasure. While Freud contends that "normal" sexual maturation redirects the girl-child's active, multifarious libido into a passive desire for penile penetration, Luisa Ingraham argues that female sexuality remains essentially autoerotic: "[W]oman has sex organs more or less everywhere ... the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined -- in [a masculine] imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness." In this view, to reject the patriarchal repression of such diverse pleasures is to reject the myth of the unified subject: women must "re-discover" themselves by embracing multiplicity, "sacrificing no one of her pleasures to another, identifying herself with none of them in particular -- never being simply one." In Ingraham's argument echoes feminist film theory's critique of the "subject of classical cinema" as a fantasy of masculine individualism and sufficiency sustained by the objectification of women. Rather than supporting Laura Mulvey's call for a radical aesthetic that destroys both cinematic pleasure and unified subjectivity, however, Irigaray's model underwrites the more recent interest in the complexities of women's cinematic pleasures and subject positions, anticipating Christine Gledhill's call for decentered subjectivities as the vehicles of new kinds of agency: "We need representations that take into account of identities, desires and pleasures that work with a degree of fluidity and contradiction -- and we need to forge different identities -- ones that help us to make productive use of the contradictions of our lives." I suggest that auto-erotic assemblages, as defined in these films, function for women filmmakers, protagonists and even spectators as a source of autoerotic satisfaction, an experience of pleasure and power that can emerge both as a stable but unbounded sense of self and a desire to extend that power and pleasure into artistic creativity.

The connection between women's driving and their growing power in Hollywood is epitomised by Mabel at the Wheel (1914), one of the first films made following the announcement that "Mabel Normand, leading woman of the Keystone Co. since its inception, is in the future to direct every picture she acts in." This two-reel comedy, Mabel takes the wheel of her boyfriend's race car, thwarting the machinations of a villainous Charles Chaplin and speeding to victory on her own. While the film seems at first a simulation of Normand's established comic persona with her well-known love of fast cars, it can also be read as an allegory of Normand's own directorial career. The fictional Mabel is heralded for her beauty over the use of her race car, much as Normand had struggled with producer and lover Mack Sennett to "take the wheel" of her own star vehicle. Her conflicts with the villain mirror the obstacles posed by Chaplin -- then an inexperienced film actor with his own directorial aspirations and the only member of Keystone to resist Normand's authority. In the film, their conflict stems from the villain's incompetence behind the wheel — to make her boyfriend jealous, Mabel goes for a ride on Charlie's motorcycle but is outraged when he accidentally sends her flying into a mud puddle. She reunites with her beau, who allows her to take the wheel and joins her in confronting Charlie. When the villain kidnaps the hero to prevent him from racing, Mabel takes his place, overcomes the obstacles the villain places in her way, and is rewarded by a throng of cheering spectators. While off-screen events differed in many respects — rather than siding with Normand, Sennett conceded to Chaplin's resistance by allowing him to co-direct — the film nevertheless provides a compelling image of the emergence of women directors in the 1910s: a woman's demonstrated talent is ap- plauded by male colleagues and the general public and presented only by the most ridiculous and impo- tent of competitors. Normand, like many of her fe- male contemporaries in the industry, was welcomed by most of her cast and crew and heralded by the press, who declared that Normand's new role as director would not only allow the star to expand her comedic talents but would "undoubtedly make Keysto- ne more popular than ever." The film thus alludes to popular discourse about the sexual harassment routinely faced by women who "travel alone" in the urban environment, a phenome-
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headlight eyes, mouthlike grill, and arduous movement toward the camera suggest that the car itself is non-plussed by the demands and restrictions of men but rather serve as a galvanising force for a new heterosocial community. Significantly, the cinema plays an important role in constituting this community, as suggested by the presence of a cameraman in the concluding scene, exclaiming, ‘cranking the machine’. What makes Mabel’s triumph so extraordinary is that it succeeds on a multivalent field of homo- and auto-erotic desire which rest atop her head, the better for us to see her expressions in closeup. However, the film avoids calling attention to this omission and her male passengers is also sans eyewear, suggesting that its motivation is less to highlight Mabel’s beauty than to keep her face free as registers the erotic pleasure with which the audience is invited to identify.

At the film’s conclusion, Mabel’s autoreligious pleasure is not repressed but ecstatically celebrated by a mostly male-crowd, which pours from the stands to congratulate her. The men neither resent her achievement nor subject her to unwanted advances, enrolling her instead in comradeship. The villain and his henchman are defeated by their own smoke bomb. Rather than ending with a heterosexually clinched orgasm, the final shot shows Mabel’s boyfriend, now freed from captivity, and father, now reconciled to his daughter’s activity, lifting her to their shoulders to congratulate her. The men neither resent her achievement nor subject her to unwanted advances, enrolling her instead in comradeship. The villain and his henchman are defeated by their own smoke bomb. Rather than ending with a heterosexually clenching orgasm, the final shot shows Mabel’s boyfriend, now freed from captivity, and father, now reconciled to his daughter’s activity, lifting her to their shoulders to congratulate her. The men neither resent her achievement nor subject her to unwanted advances, enrolling her instead in comradeship. The villain and his henchman are defeated by their own smoke bomb.
structure of containers.26 Was the real heroine of this let, like a bloomin’ bird, on a mountain top?’ a title asks. A long shot of the Maxwell driving into the foreground, lawless forces that must be conquered by Ameri- can technology – whether mining operation or automobile. The writing woman discovers that her racialised national virtue cannot protect her from this lawless Other. ‘You forget that I am an Ameri- can!’ she intellectually deifies her leering captor just before the hero and automobile arrive to save her. Yet while merely being American is no protection, the heroine triumphs by learning to act American – using technology to master savage nature and conquer threatening Others. While such ingenuity may seem odd on the part of the Canadian-born Shipman, it must be understood as part of a complex negotiation with American sponsors, industry, and target audi- ence in a postwar America striving to incorporate both new technology and female emancipation in the service of a patriarchal, imperialist, capitalist hegemony.

At the same time, the film evokes a far more ambivalent historical resonance in its recurrent im- ages of the capable woman driver and her ban- daged, bleeding and often unconscious male passenger: the highly visible role of female ambu- lance drivers in World War I. While such women were praised for giving up frivolous pursuits in service of the nation, they also evoked a host of postwar cul- tural anxieties about women’s entry into ‘masculine’ roles vacated by absent, incapacitated, and even literally castrated men. With a generation of young men physically and psychologically damaged just as the nation sought to consolidate its global power, such heroines were both needed and revered and frequently, demonised as lesbians.27 In this light there is considerable tension between the film’s cele- bration of the New Woman’s passionate attachment to the feminised vehicle of her independence and its insistence upon channeling that power in the service of a patriarchal, capitalist imperialism. While she uses technology in the service of man and nation, the heroine’s erotic attachment to the pleasures of that technology exceed the hegemonic uses to which it is put.

Most importantly, the film does not end with the reunited American family but returns to the soli- tary pleasures whence it began, recasting the iden- tification of New Woman and new technology in the figure of the woman author/filmmaker. Man, dog and flag disappear as the film announces its ambiguous ‘MORAL’: ‘Be it MOTOR - ‘... or MAD - ‘... THERE IS ALWAYS SOMETHING NEW! A “closeup” of the Max- well’s “face” - framed to cut off its human passengers, zooms into the foreground. The “motor” is graphically matched by the image of the “maiden Shipman, pound- ing excitedly at her typewriter until both machine and operator begin to tumble over the edge of the desk toward the camera. The typewriter here seems to substitute for the motion picture camera as a visible reminder of the mechanical mediation of the female imagination: like the automobile, the typewriter is not a substitute for female agency but a prosthetic exten- sion of herself, an autocratic vehicle of pleasurable creative power. The final title is punctuated with an equally exclamatory final close-up: Shipman laughs radiantly into the camera as she nearly falls over the desk herself, completely unhibited in the overflow- ing pleasure of her creative activity.

The solitary pleasure of the scene is under- scored by the conspicuous absence of Shipman’s lover, Bert Van Tuyle, a former race-car driver who plays the hero and was credited as co-writer and co-director of the film. Appearing in the opening frame only as driver of the car that expresses the story, Van Tuyle’s disappearance in the closing frame ech- oes biographical evidence that his credits reflect less a true creative partnership than a concession to male vanity. Indeed, the historical Van Tuyle, whose alco- holism and poor business sense would ultimately contribute to the downfall of Nell Shipman Produc- tions, resembles less the capable engineer who rides to the rescue than the incapacitated burden he be- comes after his head injury, a passenger in a vehicle clearly driven by Shipman.28 While the fictional con- clusion restores the hero to the driver’s seat, the framing narrative depicts a far more subversive fan- tasy: male partner, sponsors and imperialist ideolo- gies melt away as woman, automobile, typewriter and camera blur together in an ecstatic jouissance of autocratic creativity.

By the mid-1920s, the heyday of powerful women directors and producers had passed. Those who established independent studios in the late 1910s, including Shipman and Lois Weber, suc- cumbed to the box-office slump of the early 1920s, while the increasingly rigid division of Hollywood labour made it more difficult for others to move from acting or screenwriting into positions of greater authority. Perhaps, as some have speculated, women were simply pushed out of what were by then recognised as highly powerful positions in a lucrative industry.29 Nevertheless, a few women – mainly screenwriters and actors – continued to exert signifi- cant creative control well into and beyond the 1920s, albeit by negotiating their visions with the demands of powerful male studio heads and the ever more codified conventions of Hollywood filmmaking. My final reading examines the effects of these changes on the discourses of female authorship and auto- eroticism in Frances Marion’s Zander the Great (1925). Some may question my claim of ‘authorship’ for Marion, an established screenwriter who, after successfully directing the films in 1920-21, had renounced the overt authority of the director’s chair – and the resistance such authority provoked – in favor of a less visible behind-the-scenes power.30 On Zander, she is somewhat ambiguously credited as ‘editorial director’ of a film produced by William Ran- dolph Hearst, directed by George Hill (an inap- propriated another cameraman whom Marion promoted and would later marry), scripted by Lillie Hayward, and starring Marion Davies. Yet it is clear that Marion was the driving force behind the film: conceiving the story, co-authoring the script, selecting cast and director, ‘suggesting shots and angles’, and negoti- ating ongoing conflicts between the insecure Hill and the tyrannical Hearst.31 The film marks the culmina- tion of Marion’s long struggle with Hearst over the direction of Davies’ career, which began when he hired her as a writer in 1916 and continued after her promotion to head of Cosmopolitan’s West Coast production in 1923. While Hearst longed to ‘smother’ his young mistress in opulent costumes dramas – constructing her as aesthetic object – Marion fought for vehicles that would allow Davies’ comedic talents to shine. Zander epitomises the success of that struggle and was praised as a ‘personal triumph’ for Davies.32 Although the film makes only brief use of motor vehicles, the scenes in which Davies drives the car suggest a subsequent disappearance – reveal a complex ne- gotiation between the diffuse energies of autocracy and the corporate pressures of patriarchal femininity. Davies plays an impish orphan who blooms into womanhood, simultaneously irritating and subverting Mary Pickford’s idealised ‘child im- personations’. With her plain, freckled face, pigtailed, scrawny form and aggressive movements – all ex- posed in harsh, unflattering shots – young Mamie defies the aesthetic objectification of the ‘pedophilic gaze’ that Gaylyn Studlar has associated with ‘Little Marie’, even as her activities demonstrate a preco- cious sexual drive.33 In the opening scene, Mamie is distracted from her labour in the orphanage laundry by a delivery man who gives her a lollipop and shows her his marvelous motorcycle. When he walks away, Mamie (with some nudging from her companions) climbs atop the motorcycle and begins to bounce vigorously upon the seat, sucking her lollipop in- tently. The scene not-so-subtly evokes the wide-
spread turn-of-the-century anxieties about women’s bicycling, which decried not only the subversive freedom of movement the new vehicle offered but also the dangerous masturbatory possibilities of the bicycle seat – pleasures and dangers both enhanced by her motorization.34 Yet there is no effort to construct Mamie’s autoerotic pleasure as coy invitation to an objectifying gaze: she is intensely focused on her own activity, her only observers the other girls who clamor for a turn as she absentmindedly slaps them away. Mamie’s frenzied autoerotic activity is soon disrupted, however, by the repressive figure of the matron, whose appearance stutters Mamie to shift into gear and take off on a wild ride across the yard. The film reveals in the terrifying yet pleasurable thrill of the forbidden ride: pigtails flying, cicling wildly, she crashes through fences and laundry lines, knocks down the matron, and generally wreaks havoc until she bumps into a basket of laundry and falls in a heap.

The motorcycle disappears as Mamie’s autoerotic pleasure is, in classic Freudian fashion, first repressed – the matron binds her hands and locks her in a closet – then sublimated into a more ‘mature’ domestic femininity, when she is adopted by the gentle Mrs. Caldwell and given a baby – little Alexander Caldwell – to care for. But Mamie’s transformation is disrupted by Mrs. Caldwell’s death, and she must again take the wheel. When the orphanage threatens to take Zander, Mamie, in a desperate act, rides to Ford to deliver her young charge to his father, who is seeking his fortune in the West. Although the arduous automobile journey is represented somewhat elliptically – the distance from New Jersey to Arizona comically signified by Zander’s rapidly multiplying pet rabbits – the film highlights the challenges of early cross-country motoring. (The rabbits also provide a visual reminder of Mamie’s precocious sexual awareness: when later asked if she traveled alone, she ingenuously exclaims, ‘Alone! Say, mister, have you ever traveled with a couple of rabbits?’) While we do not see Mamie’s face during the sequence, her subjective point-of-view is evoked by the ironic juxtaposition of a sign – ‘Welcome Visitors!’ You are now enjoying our splendid highways – with jerking shots of the rocky, rutted dirt track through the windshield and long shots of the tiny car bumping across the desert. Like Mabel at the Wheel and Something New, Zander sensationalises the dangers facing the woman who ‘travels alone’: with no service stations for miles, Mamie stops to beg for food and rest at a ranch inhabited by a gang of bootleggers. As she enters the dark, gothic building, the Ford is visible behind her, steam pouring from its engine to indicate the impossibility of escape. While her mud-splattered face, goggles and cloak testify to the rigors of her journey and emphasise the smallness of her form as she is greeted at gunpoint, they also serve as armor against her feminine softness, recalling the spanky orphan within.

The Ford soon disappears as Mamie is reinserted into the narrative and is rechristened the newly independent Mamie, who is about to break free from patriarchal oppression. Much as in Something New, the white American woman and man unite to conquer racialised villages and domesticate the wilderness. Mamie, Dan and Zander ride off into the sunset, and the Ford is soon disrupted, however, by the repressive figure of the matron, who reaffirms the object of the male gaze but a subject of her own desires, an ‘ideal-I’ calling forth both the desire and the impossibility of escape. While her mud-spattered.getRandomLine() nulls against her feminine softness, recalling the spunky orphan within.

While the eroticised linkage of woman and machine has been a recurrent trope in feminist filmmaking, which justifies women’s empowerment not merely as an exercise of personal freedom but as an exercise of productive force for reinventing a society corrupted by masculine violence and greed. Indeed, the notion of women as the vanguard of social reform was central to the self-concept and public perception of many early women filmmakers, who were viewed as bulwarks against the corruption and anarchy of both industry and society. The Universal City women candidates ran on a platform to ‘clean up’ the company town, and directors like Lois Weber and Dorothy Davenport Reid made their careers with sweeping polemics for such causes as birth control and economic reform and against drug abuse, capital punishment, ‘white slavery’, and political corruption.44 Such efforts, in an era of war, greed and seething social inequities, represented less a Victorian conservatism than a quite radical progressivism, though they were often, like much of the progressive movement, complicit with racist and imperialist agendas. In this film, both the narrative of Zander the Great and Mamie and Louise function as an authoritarian strategy of working for power within the system rather than striking for independence can be seen as consistent with the general direction of first-wave feminism, which responded to the victory of suffrage by assuming (albeit erroneously) that women had become equal partners and could now turn from the pursuit of their own freedoms to become full participants in the progress of the nation.

While few early women filmmakers fared well as a patriarchal capitalism gained a firmer control of the diverse energies of cinematic creativity – and those who did, only by subordinating their autonomous dreams to the imperatives of Hollywood convention – their works survive as material traces of the powerful desires and utopian visions of our feminist foremothers. As such, they represent a valuable resource for a feminist film theory and practice long impoverished by the fear that our cinematic pleasures are always already compromised by patriarchy. We need not sift through the cracks and fissures of

patriarchal discourse to reconstruct feminist pleasure – it is right there before us (especially in the first two films) in the radiant image of the woman in the driver’s seat, unconsciously reveling in the manifold pleasures of speed and power, not a fetishised object of the male gaze but a subject of her own desires, an ‘ideal-I’ calling forth both the desire and the identification of the female spectator. Female autonomy thus serves as a paradigm of a pleasure defined by neither commodity fetishism (though commodities facilitate pleasure, they are not in themselves objects of desire), nor a heterosexual dichotomy of active male subject and passive female object (though it can encompass heterosexual desire), nor even a narcissism that turns self into object. Instead, these anti-erotic fantasies offer paradigms of female pleasures and powers that elude the subject-object oppositions of the phallocentric imagination. Moreover, the autoerotic pleasure of becoming one with the speed and power of the machine provides a potent metaphor for female creativity – like Shipman in the framing narrative, the artist becomes one with the creative drives that emerge from both within and beyond herself. While the erotised linkage of woman and machine has been a recurrent trope in feminist filmmaking from Christopher Strong (1933) to Theora and Louise (1981), such films often position women in any but tragic outcomes for their heroines’ desires. In contrast, early women’s films offer a vision – albeit an ambivalent one – of female autonomy and flight from patriarchal oppression but as a galvanising experience of freedom and satisfaction that empower women to take up powerful roles within their societies. As Audre Lorde has suggested, the erotic is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire ... Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors bring us closest to that fullness.45

The films I examine suggest that narrative closure need not purge subversive female energies nor bind them safely into an unchanged patriarchal order; rather, the energies unleashed by woman and machine provide the engine of a new, utopian future. The victorious Mabel, cheered by women and aliens alike, the impassioned ‘writing woman’ pounding away at her typewriter, even the domestic-
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Notes

1. For a fuller history, see Virginia Scharff, Taking the Wheel: Women and the Coming of the Motor Age (New York: Free Press, 1991), especially Chapter 4. See also Curt McConnell, A Reliable Car and a Woman Who Knows How to Drive It: The First Coast to Coast Auto Trips By Women, 1899–1916 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

2. The best extant analysis of both publicity and screen images of women drivers is William Dix, The Spreading Sweethearts of the Silent Screen: 1908–1927. http://www.welcometonostleets.com/features/sweethearts/sweethearts.frm (downloaded 12 September 2005). The automobility of Holmes and other 'serial queens' is discussed in Shewly Stimp, Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motor Picture Culture After the Nickelodeon (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 143, 148. The most detailed discussion of King's journey is in McConnell, Chapter 4; he notes that reports of King's adventures were greatly exaggerated by the army of studio publicists who followed on separate cars throughout the journey (103).


5. On automobile tours, see Scharff 79–87, on automobile films, see Stamp, Chapter 4. Among the national news reports of the Universal City election is In Woman’s Realm (New York Telegraph 10 June 1913).

6. For a standard account of this timeline, see Slide Chapter 1.


10. Mrs. Sherman A. Hitchcock, ‘A Woman’s Viewpoint of Motion’, Motor (April 1904): 19, rpt. in Schartf 27–28. Similarly, race-car driver Joan Curose as-serted that ‘if women could realise the exhilaration that comes from being able to handle a 40-horse power touring car, the sight of a woman driver would be anything but a novelty’ (rpt. in Schartf 29).


15. Ingargia, 254.


17. Moving Picture World (13 December 1913), rpt. in Slide 119.

18. Drew Chapter 2; see also Betty Harper Russell, Mabel ‘Hollywood’s First I-Don’t-Care Girl’ (NY: Lims- light, 1930), 72–73.

19. Drew notes that this unscripted accident points to an additional source of resentment for Chaplin, who at that time had even less experience with motor vehicles than he did with filmmaking (Chapter 3).

20. Moving Picture World (13 December 1913), rpt. in Slide 119. Women directors at Universal were similarly welcomed by male cast and crew (Slide 41–42).


22. Drew Chapter 3; see also Russell, 44–45, 54–55, 68–80.


24. Like the ‘writing woman’, serial heroines were often imperilled by their own quest for adventure (Stamp 126). On the sadomasochistic aspects of the serial queen tradition, see Singer 93, 124.

25. Slide 68–69. Shipman had used a similar financing strategy in the 1920 short film Trial of the Arrow, in which two women in an Essex Arrow court a chauffer’s dismissal of women drivers by beating him in a cross-country race (Drew Chapter 10).

26. Schartf, 47, 84; McConnell, Chapter 2. Drew also notes that Mary Pickford’s first highly publicised car was a 1915 Maxwell named ‘idade Pitfall’ (Chapter 2).

27. Schartf, 64–66.

28. The intimate companionship of woman and automo- bile is anticipated in the accounts of pioneering women motorists like actress Anita King, who told reporters that ‘what [she] enjoyed most’ about her transcontinental trip was ‘the daily compan- ionship with my motor. You cannot realise how close we seemed. There were many, many times in my long and tiresome trip, when had my motor failed me I would surely have perished, as I was miles beyond help, and as I realised how perfectly to be depended upon my KisselKar was, I grew more and more pals with my car’ (rpt. in McConnell 129).


32. Armatige, 30–34.


35. Marion, qtd. in Beaufach, 165–166.


41. Slide 10–11, 30–32, 84–89.

42. Lords, 278.

Abstract: Women in the driver’s seat: The auto-erotics of early women’s films. The trope of women’s ‘automobility’ in three films centered around female drivers is examined in order to chart the changing fortunes of women’s creative control in early Hollywood, looking in turn at Mabel Normand, Nell Shipman and Frances Marion. Whether behind the wheel or behind the camera, women’s mastery of exciting new technologies offered a spectacular image of New Womanhood as both practical power and thrilling adventure.
Latitude in Mass-Produced Culture’s Capital

_Brett L. Abrams_

When Your Urge’s Mauve, [go to] the Café International on Sunset Boulevard. The location offered supper, drinks, and the ability to watch boy-girls who necked and sulked and little girl customers who . . . look like boys.

The 1940 guidebook _How to Sin in Hollywood_ offered tourists this description of a commercial establishment that they could see when they visited the Hollywood area. On the opposite page, a cartoon featured two women in tuxedos above the caption “the little girl customers.” One smoked a cigar and both wore prominent lipstick. The description and cartoon presented images of women in the Los Angeles area who defied the culture’s gender and sexual norms.

The description and cartoon of Café International suggested that the book’s creators and readers accepted a link between the urban area of Hollywood, cross-dressing females, and homosexual women and men. Hollywood, the town, offered nightspots and other locations where Hollywood industry figures could act upon their non-normative gender and same-sex interests. Between the early 1920s and early 1940s, the Hollywood industry publicity departments and movie-making personnel, novelists of Hollywood, and the newspaper reporters and gossip columnists capturing Hollywood industry people’s daily lives placed cross-dressing females and other people who defied the culture’s prescriptions about proper gender and sexual behavior in their depictions of Hollywood people and places. These figures—in this article called Hollywood players—did not adhere to the automatic link between biological sex and gender behavior, such as females behaving in a conventionally feminine manner. They eschewed heteronormativity, or the cultural prescription that bound sexual activities to a man and a woman who were already married or soon intending to be wed. These female Hollywood players used nightspots, homes, parties, and studio lots in downtown Hollywood, along Sunset Strip, and in the exclusive areas of Hollywood Hills and Malibu Beach to pursue their interests, and they forged a concept of Hollywood as a place of latitude for unconventional figures. The representations of these female Hollywood players portrayed them as complex, successful figures, an unusual depiction for living persons and fictional characters who defied conventional sexual and gender norms.
These images flourished immediately after World War I because of changes in the culture and the industry. The United States witnessed the breakdown of genteel culture and its restrictions on topics of discussion in the aftermath of the war. The new “modern” culture invited greater presentation of sexual innuendo and sexuality in the mass media. Indeed, in the first era to revision sexuality around desire and fulfillment, the culture interpreted sex as central to personal identities. The entertainment for this culture would logically focus on presenting such an important topic to its audiences, and news media outlets attempting to describe celebrity personalities would focus on sexual identities, as well. By 1920, the movie studios changed their publicity approach. The divorces and other off-screen activities of several major stars forced the industry to shift from promoting stars as picture personalities, reflections off-screen of their on-screen characters. Instead, the studio publicity featured the star’s supposed everyday life and personality, with the latter necessitating the discussion of the star’s sexual behavior, which was considered central to personal identities.²

The number and variety of media that featured Hollywood movie people expanded significantly during the era. Newspaper coverage included regular articles about the industry’s personalities, occupations, and products and daily gossip columns from the six major syndicated writers on the beat. General-interest magazines, such as Time and Life, and the fanzines, such as Photoplay and Silver Screen, reached millions of readers with their weekly photographs, features, and gossip items on Hollywood. During the late 1910s, the Hollywood novel changed its focus away from the technology of movie making to stories about characters within the industry. Hollywood movies about the industry increased as movie production solidified itself in the southern California climate.³

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the development of places in urban areas where people with same-sex sexual feelings could pursue their interests and even establish a degree of community. Some locations, including parks and bathhouses, offered only temporary and clandestine opportunities, predominantly to males. Other locations, such as bars in vice or tourist areas, always faced the threat of official repression. A few spaces, including the social club Heterodoxy and basement apartments in areas like Greenwich Village, Harlem, and Chicago’s South Side, offered regular meeting places for a subsection of the nonconformist population of these cities for a short time.⁴ These places rarely appeared in the media, except during local authorities’ efforts to drive the people who defied gender and sexual norms from local bars.⁵

Scholars have noted that the images of women in the media changed significantly during the 1920s and 1930s. The dominant image of the “New Woman” during the 1920s was the flapper. While flappers enjoyed greater freedom in consumption and sexual awareness, much of their consumption and sexual gratification focused on pleasing males, not on engaging in same-sex sexuality. The flapper embraced a career for herself until she got married and rarely acted in other ways that defied the newly established gender norms of the era.⁶ Images of women who defied the culture’s dominant images, such as matrons, faced ridicule for representing Victorian rather than “modern” gender and sexual attitudes.⁷ Figures who challenged sexual norms in literature of the era sparked censorship efforts, despite appearing as miserable characters who experienced emotional turmoil and became outcasts or suicide victims or who engaged in self-loathe and despair.⁸ Despite the occasional movie that showed a successful independent woman, during the period before the establishment of the Production Code Administration in the mid-1930s, most of the adulterers, gold diggers, and other “fallen women” met unfortunate ends or were forced to redeem themselves at the end of the movie.⁹

Scholars writing in the 1980s and 1990s, including Vito Russo and Andrea Weiss, have observed that in most Hollywood productions from the early 1910s to the mid-1970s, homosexuals led lonely lives, experienced derision, and sometimes became victims of murder or suicide. Lesbians appeared as vampires who preyed upon innocent younger women.¹⁰ Historians of the movie industry noted few instances of nonconformist imagery in news about the movie industry. Generally, they determined that the industry viewed these images as detrimental to the business and observed that the industry covered up gender and sexual nonconformity by mainstreaming the images.¹¹

The depictions of Hollywood players created by the movie studio publicity departments, their movie-making personnel, newspaper and magazine reporters, and other observers of the movie industry belied the findings regarding the types of urban spaces available to nonconformists and their presentation within the media. The Hollywood players of the 1920s and 1930s illustrated that within the Los Angeles environs people engaged in alternative gender and sexual behaviors and used nightclubs, homes, parties, and studio lots as locations where they could act upon their interests. The media images depicted these figures throughout the period. The players appeared successful in their personal and professional careers, indicating that the capital of the world’s mass-produced culture had a unique relationship to the “New Woman” and other gender and sexual nonconformists of the era.

Nightspots
The Café International nightclub appeared on one of Hollywood’s most magical streets, Sunset Boulevard. During the 1920s Hollywood’s population
quadrupled as the area expanded west through Beverly Hills and north into the San Fernando Valley. Los Angeles developed a manufacturing base in automobiles and aircraft, expanded its oil refinery industry, and emerged as one of the top tourist locations in the country. Los Angeles also developed the Mediterranean and Spanish Revival architectural styles and Southland literature. Movie-making became the eleventh largest industry in the nation. The large studios transformed the “barn” structures of the early 1920s into the series of buildings and sets behind tall gates, giving the studios the look of fiefdoms. The production wings of the big eight studios functioned like factories. Each studio employed nearly three thousand people, and a single department, such as Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s makeup department, could handle twelve hundred actors in an hour.

The growth of the movie industry brought more people and money to the Los Angeles area. As the movie industry grew, related industries, including costume and prop stores, expanded. Between 1917 and the early 1930s, the number of restaurants and lunchrooms quadrupled. They spread, as did nightclubs, from the Spring Street area in downtown Los Angeles to two major sections of Hollywood. The blocks around the intersection of Hollywood and Vine in downtown Hollywood contained luxurious hotels, elaborate beauty parlors, shops, and widely publicized restaurants such as the Brown Derby. The old town of Sherman, later to become West Hollywood, clustered its stores, nightclubs, and restaurants in groups along Santa Monica and Sunset Boulevards.

Stars continued to go to clubs during the 1920s in towns like Vernon and Culver City to slum in the cabarets and speakeasies. However, by 1930, Hollywood had “more Neon lights than Broadway... It is gayer, newer, brighter, and younger than anything in the history of man.” The majority of the “in” places congregated along the Sunset Strip, a three-square-mile area that bordered Hollywood and Beverly Hills. The area remained outside the city of Los Angeles and was policed by the Los Angeles County sheriff. Many famous stars greeted the boys in the patrol cars by name in this unincorporated area of West Hollywood. Such familiar relationships reflected the power relationships of the city and the capacity of people from all walks of life to become star struck and led to a more relaxed attitude toward the enforcement of certain laws. The Sunset Strip gained notoriety as one of the most famous hot spots in the country. Of the nightclubs in the area, The Barn, La Bohème, the Club New Yorker, and the Back Yard Café all featured cross-dressing performers and clientele. Despite the protests of religious figures and other citizens that the bars and nightclubs, gambling houses, and houses of ill repute invaded the best residential districts, the Strip drew the stars, the aristocracy, and the politicians. Hollywood, the industry, and the newspapers and magazines that covered it promoted these locations to maintain fan interest and boost the sales of its products.

One of the most famous night spots in Hollywood served its customers in a building shaped like a man’s hat. The Brown Derby restaurant attracted actors, directors, producers, and screenwriters of the industry from noon until the early morning hours. The Vine Street location reserved its booths and the north wall front tables for stars and executives, while others sat in the center. All hoped to get noticed. One of the earliest scenes in the movie What Price Hollywood? occurred inside this restaurant: Drunken motion picture director Max Carey walks in throwing gardenias he bought from an old woman outside. Smiling, he greets the people he knows. He briefly exits the screen. (The viewer sees a section of the restaurant as the shot switches from a medium to a long shot.) Carey continues walking around the restaurant and bumps into the mannishly attired woman as she rises from her table. His mouth drops as he steps back and says, “I beg your pardon, old man.” As she straightens her suit jacket, Max slowly looks down then up her torso and rolls his eyes back in his head. Reaches out his hand and taps her elbow. “Pardon me, who’s your tailor?” She turns her back and strides out as he smirks then carries on giving out the flowers.

The creative team behind What Price Hollywood? (RKO, 1932) attempted to “tell the truth about Hollywood.” Producer David O. Selznick thought the “trouble with most films about Hollywood was that they gave a false picture, that they burlesqued it, or they oversentimentalized [sic] it. . . . My notion . . . dialogue was actually straight out of life and was straight ‘reportage.’” Evidently, Selznick and the movie-making personnel at RKO purposely included an image of a woman in men’s attire in their movie because they thought it captured the essence of what occurred in Hollywood.

The movie places its audience inside the most famous Hollywood eatery in downtown Hollywood. The scene puts a variety of Hollywood types on display, including a lecherous agent, an egotistical actor, and a producer with his syconphant dining in a booth. The presence of the mannishly dressed woman indicates that these women are part of Hollywood nightlife. Her introduction differs from the presentation of other Hollywood types. Carey briefly exits before returning into view and immediately bumping into the woman in a man’s suit. Of all the Hollywood types presented in this scene, the movie tries to surprise its viewers only when it introduces the Hollywood player.

The separation of this woman’s image from the other industry types illustrates the significance of the role of Hollywood players in Hollywood nightlife. The image makes the restaurant seem like a wild and fantastic place. The woman’s mannish dress hints that she had lesbian interests. The difference in
her introduction indicates that the image represents a unique type of person and spurs the belief that Hollywood nightlife is wild because it contains special places where people who act on taboo interests dine. The player image provides audiences with the perception of Hollywood nightlife as fantastic by giving them the experience of seeing a person who pushes the culture’s sexual boundaries beyond their everyday experience.

The scene at the Brown Derby and the image of the mannishly-dressed, presumptively lesbian enhanced the picture’s reputation for RKO. The scene corroborated the perception of Hollywood held by many people around the world. As critics for the trade magazine Motion Picture Herald informed theater owners, What Price Hollywood? was a serio-burlesque load of inside dope on what folk everywhere thought Hollywood was. The box office returns from most U.S. cities validated the trade reviewers’ perceptions that the motion picture would fulfill audience expectations.19

The image sacrifices truth for entertainment value. The mannish female character’s tailored suit is too large for her, prompting Carey’s quip about wanting to know about her tailor. Among the Hollywood women wearing masculine tailored suits during the era, actress Marlene Dietrich, director Dorothy Arzner, and screenwriter Mercedes de Acosta wore suits with uncannily sharp lines and style. Certainly producer David Selznick, director George Cukor, and the four screenwriters knew about the sharp style affected by women in men’s clothing. But the production team, wanting to add humor to the scene, chose to make her the object of the joke. Still, the mannish woman in the movie had more positive attributes than depictions of lesbians in the popular culture of the era: she had an attractive face and a torso that was neither overly boylsh nor overweight; she treated herself well, dining at a hot spot; and she had a place within the motion picture industry community.

Hollywood women in masculine attire appeared occasionally in newspaper and magazine gossip columns. While validating the image from What Price Hollywood? the gossip items exchanged information, fostered understandings of the conception of Hollywood, and created a community among its readers. With items such as “Director Dorothy Arzner, who favored ‘man-tailored suits,’ dined with actress friends at La Maze,” “[Arzner] lunched with a variety of women friends, including actress Claudette Colbert, at the exclusive Vendomes,” and “Director George Cukor and screenwriter Zoe Akins held a party for their friend actress Tallulah Bankhead [who frequently donned mannish attire] at a downtown French café”20 they placed women in men’s clothing at a variety of Hollywood’s eateries and watering holes. Like the character in What Price Hollywood?, the gossip items associated Hollywood nightlife with the thrill of seeing women who defied the norm for women’s attire. Frequently, adoption of such clothing signaled a same-sex sexual interest, so that readers also received the titillation of encountering females who pursued taboo sexual interests.

Items like the three above benefited the movie industry and the media organizations. The publicity focused readers’ attention on movie industry figures. The items seemed to present specific knowledge about the women’s activities, providing readers with what they wanted and presumably keeping them reading the news outlet for more information. As Richard Schickel argued in Intimate Strangers, readers wanted knowledge about celebrities in their daily lives. This desire defined Hollywood publicity departments and the media’s presentation of celebrity pieces. The items could not be too sensational, or readers would disbelieve it and would not get the experience that they sought from reading. The disappointment would presumably motivate them to seek another source of information and thus stop reading the original media source.21

Publicity items about the mannishly attired women in Hollywood nightclubs and restaurants portrayed them as successful people, Hollywood players who enjoyed fine lives in Hollywood. Important industry figures, the women worked for the major movie studios on big-budget pictures, earning large salaries that enabled them to dine at exclusive nightspots. They forged friendships, attended and hosted parties, and built a community of like-minded women in Hollywood.

The mannishly dressed woman in Hollywood nightlife reached its apex with the publicity featuring Marlene Dietrich. Certainly, people knew that Dietrich could cross-dress. In two other successful Hollywood movies, she wore tuxedos. As early as the fall of 1930, gossip columnist Louella Parsons noted Dietrich’s preference for pants in her daily life. During those early years Paramount avoided discussing Dietrich’s clothing preferences. However, in late 1932, Dietrich had a box office failure with her movie Blonde Venus. Paramount signed Dietrich to an expensive five-year contract and severed her relationship with the director, Josef Von Sternberg. The studio sought an image with which to promote their star, and the studio’s publicity department launched a huge publicity campaign for Dietrich’s new movie, Song of Songs (1933). The publicists featured her clothing, knowing that most successful publicity campaigns revolved around an aspect of the star’s personality, because, as noted earlier, that was the information that the public sought. As one industry columnist stated, “The truth about that masculine attire which Marlene Dietrich affects these day is this. She liked wearing that sort of clothes—trousers. Paramount objected. Marlene insisted on trotting about in pants. Finally they gave up, ‘Oh well,’ sighed Paramount, ‘then we’ll make a cult of it—exploit Marlene in men’s clothes.’”22
Paramount’s publicity department staged their events in the same places in downtown Hollywood and along the Strip that the earlier depictions of women in men’s clothing occurred. In January 1933, a few articles and several industry columnists chronicled Dietrich’s attire. A tabloid piece provided abundant detail about Dietrich’s apparel. “Marlene Dietrich gave the photo snappers and autograph hounds a real thrill yesterday by appearing at the Brown Derby with long gray flannel trousers, blue sweater, cap to match, dark gray mannish coat and her attorney, Ralph Blum.” An item in the *Los Angeles Times* offered more context. “Lunching with Mamoulian [Dietrich was] still wearing trousers and coats and evidently having them made to order. It is said she has just ordered two or three Tuxedo suits to wear in the evening. It is also said that she ate considerable humble pie in coming back to Paramount.” Another tabloid item suggested a reaction to readers as it informed them that Dietrich’s Hollywood nightlife style caused heads to turn. “Marlene Dietrich created a mild sensation when she arrived at the El Mirador hotel in Palm Springs.... She wore masculine attire for all occasions at the desert resort.” These items accomplished the studio’s goal of having the star receive significant media coverage, and reporting the actress wearing men’s clothing at Hollywood restaurants made Hollywood nightlife appear wild and decadent in a humorous manner.

The studio offered readers an interpretation of these images that did not promote the connection between Hollywood nightlife and the star’s romantic life. Paramount’s publicity department framed this “new” Dietrich image as the start of a fashion trend. Despite clothing that stretched gender conventions for women, the publicity department still linked Dietrich’s image with a cultural understanding of woman as display object of consumer culture products. Some contemporaries writing on Dietrich’s masculine attire interpreted the image similarly. “‘Will it be overalls next?’ an industry columnist wondered. ‘Depends probably on how much publicity Katharine Hepburn gets out of her favorite garb. Anyway, they seem to be organizing a publicity campaign on them. It’s probably rivalry for Dietrich’s trousers.’” Others perceived that the “new” Dietrich image offered hints about Dietrich’s sexual activities. The images spurred readers to connect the star’s romantic life with Hollywood nightlife, turning that nightlife into a site for fantasies. Dietrich’s occasional beau and confidant Maurice Chevalier expressed the star’s interest in heterosexual males. “I told Marlene myself that if she would wear men’s clothes and women’s garments even to the extent of fifty-fifty, I would find it the most attractive and charming idea.... [S]he looks wonderful in men’s attire.” Director Josef von Sternberg noted that Dietrich’s adoption of masculine dress also appealed to another romantic interest. Von Sternberg described his motive for Dietrich in male tuxedos in two motion...
pictures. “The formal male finery fitted her with much charm, and I not only wished to touch lightly on a Lesbian accent, . . . but also to demonstrate that her sensual appeal was not entirely due to the classic formation of her legs.” The Dietrich image positioned the Hollywood player in Hollywood nightlife but also gave that nightlife an appeal to those readers with player interests of their own.

The Dietrich images revealed that Paramount’s publicity department devised a campaign around presenting one of the industry’s biggest stars as a Hollywood player. The decision to promote her habit of wearing tailored suits and slacks in restaurants and other locations illustrated both the studio’s intentional use of Hollywood player imagery and the promotional value of the imagery. The Dietrich campaign worked. People remembered the images.

Other creators used the Dietrich Hollywood player image and connected it to Hollywood nightlife. In mid-1933, the great songwriting team of Richard Rogers and Lorenz Hart wrote “I’m One of the Boys” for the motion picture Hollywood Party. The song chronicled the activities of a woman “who was One of the Boys, girls. I go to the tailor that Marlene employs because no dresses from France are so modern as these. And under my pants are BVD’s. . . . Now I take my brandy at the bar. Dice, cards, and tobacco are my favorite toys. . . .” The possibility that the song might appear in the movie caused the Studio Relations Committee’s head to write to MGM executive Eddie Mannix. As the chief of the censorship organization for the industry, he advised Mannix not to play “I’m One of the Boys” in any way that might be suggestive of lesbianism.

The Dietrich campaign proved successful because audience members remembered it. When readers visited Hollywood a few years later, they regularly asked whether Miss Dietrich really wore trousers. Guides told visitors that the Brown Derby would be a good place to see the star for themselves. The guides’ advice confirmed the accuracy of the Dietrich publicity campaign. They also gave the visitors the chance to experience the Hollywood nightlife fantasy themselves.

The city government tried to halt the cross-dressing of women and men in the nightclubs. The Los Angeles City Council passed a law that prohibited the appearance of people in drag within a café, unless employed by the café. Contemporary observers and current scholars observed the numerous raids on female and male cross-dressing nightclubs in late 1933 and thought the law would close these locations, but the existence of Club International in the late 1930s proved this incorrect. The fans’ enjoyment of the Dietrich image and the chumminess of the Los Angeles Sheriff’s Office offered key reasons as to why the policing effort failed.

Women in men’s clothing dined and drank in restaurants and nightclubs in downtown Hollywood and along the Sunset Strip. These female industry people influenced the perception of Hollywood, the town and the cultural symbol. Their appearance made Hollywood a place where women who did not abide by the culture’s gender and sexual norms had a public presence on the town and in the media. They formed an unmistakable addition to the mystique of Hollywood nightlife. Their presence helped the restaurants and nightclubs appear wild and decadent, allowing Hollywood nightlife to stand apart from all other depictions of city nightlife in the media.

Houses

During the early 1920s, the growing movie industry and expanding city offered several women who worked in the other creative trades the opportunity to establish homes where they could be Hollywood players. Alla Nazimova, an accomplished violinist and Stanislavski-trained actress who became the leading interpreter of Ibsen on the Broadway stage before becoming known as a silent-film actress, ranked among the top stars in the annual Photoplay popularity poll in the late 1910s. The star moved west of downtown Hollywood, and her house at 8080 Sunset Boulevard made her a leader in the transformation of Sunset Boulevard into the Strip. She formed a development company and turned her homestead into a complex of twenty-five bungalows that lined the largest swimming pool in Hollywood. She named the place the “Garden of Allah,” adding the “h” to her given name to associate it with the garden hostelry of sacred and profane love in Robert Hichens’s 1904 novel, The Garden of Allah.

Nazimova’s homestead influenced the development of Hollywood as a town and its conception as a place of latitude for women. A group of Nazimova’s friends who met regularly at the star’s home and enjoyed ribald activities became known as the “8080 Club.” After Nazimova left Hollywood in the mid-1920s, her homestead became an apartment complex for many of the workers who came to Hollywood during the first years of the talkies.

Media descriptions of Nazimova’s home revealed that her house offered the star the opportunity to display her cross-gender clothing and other aspects of her Hollywood player personality. As the head of her own production company, Nazimova decided that this type of publicity was beneficial to her image and would make her movies successful. An interviewer for Photoplay described her masculine attire in the living room of Nazimova’s house:

“She enters whistling,” I observed aloud. Nazimova made a move and twirled into the corner of a divan, drawing her feet up after. The effect was boyish, shining black hair cropped very short and parted on one side, a
white Eton collar over a dark blouse, a short plaid skirt and flat-heeled brogues, and an abnormally long cigarette holder properly functioning. Nazimova created a cross-gender look while she also appeared to be the “head of her castle.” The interior décor of purple divans, crystal lights, and a mirror laced with gold reflected Nazimova’s outsized personality. The reporter notes that within the house Nazimova revealed a dash of “diablerie” (wickedness) about her, so that one could not precisely say that heaven was her home.

The star directed her publicity in a similar manner with newspapers. Newspaper coverage described Nazimova’s home as a location where she could express another of her personality traits, a preference for the company of women. Nazimova brought a Hollywood player’s defiance of gender norms to her friendships with young women, telling reporters that, “They call me Peter and sometimes Mimi.” Nazimova’s first nickname linked the actress to a male character, Peter Pan, while the latter nickname alluded to the tragic lover in La Bohème. One set of gossip items said that the star’s swimming pool, crowded only with Hollywood ingénues, contained underwater lights that illuminated the water at night. The gossip united the physical display of female bodies around a swimming pool with a sensuous environment to suggest homosexuality at her Hollywood home.

Nazimova used interviews at her home to publicly attack gender conventions. The movie star emphasized that a woman must live her own life: “A woman living a creative life is bound, necessarily, to do things sometimes defiant to convention. In order to fulfill herself, she should live freely.” Nazimova’s position regarding women’s domestic role was unique even among women who identified themselves as feminists during the 1920s. Scholars have observed that a few second-generation New Woman writers used their feminist language to attack conventions. However, their efforts sparked representations that depicted them as unnatural followed by criticism and the full brunt of social ostracism and legal censorship. Nazimova and other Hollywood players issued stinging attacks on gender and romantic conventions of the era and received little criticism from the media, politicians, or other industry people.

Nazimova was not the only woman in Hollywood to use her house as a location for the expression of Hollywood player behaviors. Women dominated the industry’s screenwriting departments throughout the 1920s. As career women who earned significant incomes, screenwriters faced questions about their attitudes toward their careers, motherhood, and family. Indeed, the sexual and gender behavior of these women was questionable enough that twenty years later F. Scott Fitzgerald noted in his last novel, The Last Tycoon, that successful screenwriter Jane Meloney received numerous labels, many focused on the private world of her sexuality. “The little blonde of fifty,” he wrote, “could hear the fifty assorted opinions of Hollywood . . . a sentimental dope, the smartest woman on the lot, and of course, nymphomaniac, virgin, pushover, a Lesbian.” Most labels were generally not used by studio employees to attack but to understand the wealthy writer.

The extensive newspaper coverage of a bizarre love triangle in the late 1920s thrilled readers with revelations that some screenwriters pursued their Hollywood player interests in their homes. After the disclosure of her husband’s death and his female biological sex, screenwriter Beth Rowland explained in the press that her marriage to Peter Stratford resulted from the love and respect that emerged during a two-year correspondence before Stratford declared “his” love for Rowland. The widow described her role as a platonic wife, nurse, and homemaker to a fastidious gentleman. However, the testimony of others, including Rowland’s son, depicted Stratford as a healthy and active person, raising the suggestion that the pair shared a same-sex marriage. This appears more likely when one considers that Rowland used the term “infidelity” when she discovered Stratford wrote endearing letters to Rowland’s screenwriter friend Alma Thompson.

Alma Thompson appeared to live a player’s existence in a ranch house in Hollywood. Thompson studied mysticism and claimed she wrote to Stratford out of sympathy for his affliction, but their letters contained appeals for a deeper love and carried the salutations “Dearest Lamb” and “Dear Pedar.” Thompson sent Stratford secret rose petals and Stratford referred to Thompson as “my soul.” The exchange of deeply emotional letters with a person she knew as the husband of her friend made Thompson the “other” woman. Whether Thompson knew herself to be part of a triangle of three females, the screenwriter actively engaged in an adulterous emotional affair with a person she believed to be a married man, or knew to be a woman living as a man. Fittingly, Alma Thompson’s one screen credit came a few years later for the 1933 feature I Loved A Woman.

Another screenwriter with few movie credits generated enough interest to appear in publicity pieces throughout the 1930s. The child of an aristocratic Spanish family from Cuba, Mercedes de Acosta’s mother called her Rafael, dressed her in male clothes, and encouraged her to believe that she was a boy for several years. De Acosta married painter Abram Poole in 1921, but the pair led increasingly separate lives and were divorced in 1935. A novelist, playwright, poet, and Hollywood screenwriter, de Acosta achieved fame as a confidante and companion to several women in theatrical, artistic, and motion picture circles. During de Acosta’s first year as a screenwriter, Hollywood reporter
Alma Whitaker visited de Acosta’s home and offered a description of de Acosta in terms that revealed her Hollywood player nature. Whitaker noted that de Acosta was in her dangerously attractive late thirties and “affects the strictly tailored idea, even unto a genuine walking shoe.” The screenwriter crossed the culture’s gender boundaries for clothing within her home.

After mentioning that de Acosta lived alone in Hollywood while her husband stayed in New York City, Whitaker noted, “Miss de Acosta has taken a delightful house at Brentwood Heights, where she is ensconced with her servants and her dogs and she says her stay is indefinite. She also owns a home in New York and an apartment in Paris.” The screenwriter expected a long, comfortable stay in her new, charming residence without her husband, whom she soon divorced. Afterward, she established a “family” in her Hollywood home over which she ruled. The image highlighted de Acosta as a Hollywood player. Unlike other images of screenwriters and their homes, the piece neither describes de Acosta’s house in feminine terms, nor does it define the screenwriter’s relationship to her home in a manner that the culture associated with females. Readers discovered that the screenwriter created this life for herself in the hills of Los Angeles County, in an exclusive residential area north and east of Beverly Hills where stars like Gary Cooper and Shirley Temple lived.

De Acosta, like Nazimova, argued for the right to defy the culture’s gender conventions. She told an interviewer, “Of course, I think matrimony is out of date. I don’t approve of it at all. . . Divorce . . . should be unnecessary. And if matrimony were abolished it would be.” Then, de Acosta added that she had no children, noting that “she can imagine how some mothers will feel about me.” The Hollywood player challenged the prevailing family structure of the home during a time when the culture strongly encouraged women to limit their aspirations to husband, family, and domesticity. Still, de Acosta faced no repercussions within or outside the industry as the result of expressing her opinions. She lived in Hollywood over the next decade, with Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich among her circle of friends.

For two decades Hollywood actresses and screenwriters used their homes to pursue their Hollywood player interests. They wore men’s clothing as they relaxed in their private space, creating memorable images for reporters to share with the public. Nazimova held all-female pool parties in their expansive back yards, and Thompson engaged in sexual mysticism with their girlfriend’s female husband in their small Hollywood bungalow, both notable examples of pervasive player activity. They used their porches to offer opinions to the press that challenged the culture’s limits on the woman gender. Their presence made the Hollywood town a place where women owned and ruled large homes. Their appearance associated the Hollywood celebrity home with outsized personalities that carried overtones of the taboo, unique among the depictions of large homes in the media.

**PARTIES**

Private parties provided another Hollywood location where female Hollywood players acted upon their interests. A journalist of the era described these galas as “the last word in American social relaxation, rich with the super costly meats and drinks, alive with the unrestrained wit, whoopee and love-making of the Republic’s most romantic characters.” During the 1920s, disclosures such as those from the trials of Fatty Arbuckle gave Hollywood parties a reputation as wild affairs.

A famous movie comedian, Fatty Arbuckle attended a large, exciting party in a San Francisco hotel during which former actress Virginia Rappe died under mysterious circumstances. Accused of causing her death, Arbuckle underwent three trials that received detailed coverage in metropolitan dailies from late 1921 through 1922. Despite an acquittal, the negative publicity ended Arbuckle’s career. Scholars have used the Arbuckle affair to demonstrate that the industry strove to control scandal and the publicizing of unorthodox behavior.

The coverage of the Arbuckle incident illustrated the important difference between the Arbuckle image and the Hollywood player images. In the Arbuckle case, the industry struggled to control the dissemination of information and perspectives on the incident because the trial grabbed the nation’s attention and granted opponents of the industry a weapon with which to advance their view that Hollywood was a pernicious influence upon American morals and values. Furthermore, Arbuckle’s story did not allow for a humorous perspective that could put a spin on the matter that might benefit the industry. Other groups successfully argued that the Arbuckle affair was symptomatic of social problems that required collective legal action against the motion picture industry. Arbuckle might be a murderer, or at least, a menace to other people. This potential threat motivated the Hollywood industry to work to remove negative images from media and public attention as soon as possible and to placate opponents. In contrast, the Hollywood player image represented Hollywood insider or semi-independent perspectives and did not create sparks that threatened the movie industry or the conception of Hollywood. The Hollywood players made Hollywood locations look fun and playfully decadent, but certainly not violent or harmful.

Two novels, one by Nina Putnam and another by Jim Tully, featured Hollywood private parties within five years of the Arbuckle affair. Each included de-
pictions of Hollywood players that the editors and publishers deemed acceptable to present to readers. As observers of the Hollywood industry and its world, both authors sought to describe to the readers of their novels what each saw as the truth about Hollywood.

Author Nina Putnam included a Hollywood private party in *Laughter Limited*, her book about a young woman’s attempt to become a movie star. Bonnie and her friend Anita meet a writer, who takes them to a famous director’s house on Malibu Beach for a party. All kinds of pawing occurs after enormous amounts of great food and drink. “[When] Bonnie ran away as Tom Muro himself put a hand on her shoulder [publicity director Greg] Strickland tells Bonnie to come across and she’ll get into pictures.”

The author depicts Hollywood private parties as a place of intense revelry. After sating their eating and drinking desires, all the partiers begin acting to satisfy their libidos. Hollywood private parties offered industry people and their guests locations where they could meet the upper echelon of the movie industry. They also served as places where the guests could engage in any sexual activity they desired. Many enjoyed these Hollywood player activities. Others, like the lead character in the novel, perceived the experience as a potential source of extortion. While this image suggested that some might see Hollywood player activities as coercive, it also suggested that other women enjoyed the revelry. In addition, none of the revelers at the party hurt their professional or social lives through participation in the party activities.

The novel received only a few reviews. Most respected Putnam’s writing and thought the book entertaining. One reviewer concentrated on the experience of the main character and believed that the “age-old story” of the “job party” was beneath Putnam’s capabilities. This reviewer likened the women at the party to the forty-niners going west to stake their claim at striking it rich and having as likely a chance at success. She saw no reason to doubt the party’s realism but suggested that a focus upon the producers and directors who received the women’s favors would prove as truthful and more interesting.

In 1926, Jim Tully, one of the founders of the naturalist “proletarian” school of writers in the U.S. and former publicist for Charlie Chaplin, released his Hollywood novel, *Jarnegan*. The publisher promoted *Jarnegan* as the first honestly written novel about Hollywood. Tully’s book sold well in its first printing but never went into a second printing. Over the remaining two decades of his life, Tully wrote novels and articles about Hollywood stars for magazines ranging from *Vanity Fair* to *The New Movie Magazine*.

Near the end of the novel, the main characters set off to crash a large party. Jarnegan, his assistant director Jimmy, and two female friends drive into the Hollywood Hills. Fueled by a strong anger over a fellow director’s misbehavior with a female extra for whom he cared, Jarnegan goes to find the man. He walks into the petting party of a movie producer to see “women at the party were semi-nude, not in happy abandon, but in middle-class vulgarity.” The director’s Hollywood private party offers guests splendid costly food, drinks, and the most beautiful people in the movie colony. Despite Jarnegan’s jaundiced view of the affair, the private party provides the best of everything. Hollywood women can enjoy the lavish environment and also use the Hollywood party as a place to engage in a variety of sexual activities with other guests, regardless of marital status or sexual interests.

Critics enjoyed the novel. They viewed the book as a vivid picture of life out of the commonplace and written directly from material observed at first hand. A story about a rough customer, the novel struck critics as part of the expansion of the scope and intensity that changed the formerly polite American novel. The reviewers saw the party as part of the depiction of a feverish populace’s pursuit of wine, women, and song—and they cared little about missing the singing. While not addressing the truth of the presentation, reviewers noted that Tully’s experience meant he should know of what he wrote.

Both Putnam and Tully thought that describing Hollywood — the town and concept — required a scene featuring the lavish private parties thrown by the industry’s creative people. The novels placed these private parties in the large homes along Malibu Beach and in the Hollywood Hills, exclusive residential areas in distinctive natural environments. Top movie people competed to own homes in these locations. Industry people who owned the limited number of places along Malibu Beach included a small percentage of the studio heads, directors, and top actors. The homes were far away from everyday life and received little police surveillance, and an invitation to a private party there offered the guest the chance to escape. Both authors showed that in such an environment people established their own rules and provided male and female guests a place where they could engage in a variety of sexual activities with any other guest. According to both authors, the guests could partake in these activities without negative repercussions in their personal or professional lives. The party scenes mixed morality, titillation, and coercion. Some readers might have enjoyed the hint of sexual excitement and absorbed a moral lesson. Others could have felt titillation from the sexuality and a charge from the sense of coercive nature to the sexual exchanges. The party images offered the first set of readers a tonic to purify their excitement, while the latter set of readers received excitement and the fulfillment of potential fantasies.

When Clark Gable separated from his wife, Maria Langham, gossip columnists noted that he and actress Carole Lombard attended public affairs and places together. Knowing the media coverage and the stars’ continued appear-
ance together, MGM invited its star Gable to the movie premiere and party for the movie 1938 *Marie Antoinette* at a famous nightclub on the Sunset Strip. Lombard accompanied Gable, despite his status as a married man. A huge photograph in *Life* magazine showed the pair smiling as they sat at a table. The caption noted, “Carole Lombard and Clark Gable had the best time at the Tropicader. Always full of fun and careless of dignity, they are one of Hollywood’s delightful couples. They can not marry because Gable’s wife has refused to divorce him.”

The style in which the information about the stars appeared and the positive presentation of Gable and Lombard’s behavior encouraged readers to approve of the couple and their nonconformist sexual activity. The image also offered readers the opportunity to imagine themselves in this type of relationship.

A major media entity taking a photograph inside a studio party would most likely have occurred with studio cooperation. Usually, studios encouraged publicity when they believed that the image benefited the star and the industry. As noted earlier, the studios strove to link publicity images to either a real or imagined personality trait of the star. They also hoped to make the image something with which fans could identify so that they would feel closer to the star and continue coming to their movies.

MGM and *Life* proved to be correct, for both stars remained very popular. Gable went on to his biggest role in *Gone with the Wind*. Lombard made a few more successful movies with Paramount studios. Readers accepted Gable’s image as a rogue, but what enabled them to accept Lombard’s status as the other woman? Carole Lombard developed her popular screen persona based on several screwball comedies during the 1930s. After her short marriage to actor William Powell, Lombard forged an off-screen personality as a single woman—quirky, feminine, and independent. The actress was also well known for her big parties. Her party across the entire Venice Pier Amusement Park late in 1937 was a big hit with industry people. The party generated some racy publicity images, including photographs of Dietrich, Claudette Colbert, and Lombard showing their legs. After Lombard cut back on these affairs because of her relationship with Gable, many Hollywood insiders missed them. A fan magazine reporter summed up the attitude of some in Hollywood in an article entitled, “What ever happened to Carole Lombard?” Like Hollywood insiders who enjoyed her personality, many of her fans enjoyed Lombard’s antics and lifestyle and presumably thought her an appropriate match for the rogue Gable.

The image of the pair at the movie premiere party illustrated the degree of acceptance of Hollywood players. The studios invited Hollywood players to their premiere parties and did not force them to hide their nonconformist be-

haviors. In this instance, the studio featured the Hollywood players in their publicity about the studio party. The industry party offered Lombard a place to enjoy herself with her paramour and their friends. Lombard maintained her position as a movie star and as an admired person within and outside the movie community. Studios did not extend the same invitations to same-sex couples.

**STUDIO LOTS**

Female Hollywood players did not have to confine their pursuit of their gender bending, adultery, or same-sex interests to their leisure time. The studio grounds also provided times and places where the women could behave as they wished. While the public could not often walk behind the studio gates, studio publicity departments, newspaper reporters and gossip columnists, and Hollywood novelists provided a public view of the lots and the women who defied gender and sexual norms.

Gossip columns about the movie industry devoted a significant amount of space to glimpses behind the scenes. Some of the earliest columns noted the presence of stars who crossed gender boundaries. Alla Nazimova, during the height of her popularity, appeared so comfortable around the studio that she wore her masculine attire. This prompted one columnist to report that “[There were] rumors around that Nazimova has adopted trousers while lounging at the studio.” A decade later, another star with Metro studios made her private space on the lot reflect her defiance of gender norms: A magazine article characterized Greta Garbo’s large dressing room, where the reclusive actress frequently rested between takes, as so lacking in decorations that the environment suffered from a masculine severity. The fan magazines ran a two-part piece a year earlier on Garbo’s private life that included gender-bending decorations and actions. Indeed, MGM released a few publicity items regarding the star’s cross-dressing, featuring a beret and tailored suits that she wore.

MGM’s *Bombshell*, a 1933 movie about the industry, argued that the producers went further than providing female Hollywood players space to be themselves on the lot; they helped to manufacture a player image for its female stars. The movie depicted the life of fictitious star Lola Burns, played by Jean Harlow. Burns, known to her fans as the “Blonde Bombshell,” had an image as a wanton woman who loved and left all sorts of men. Jean Harlow was known for her platinum blonde hair and alluring figure, and the movie was based loosely on her real-life experiences.

In the movie, Burns dislikes her image and the daily demands she faces, and she wants to change everything. At work, the actress needs to shoot retakes of
her last movie, because the Hays Office and the production codes deem some scenes too risqué. At home, she copes with a free-loading family and her two jealous suitors. In the media, she faces questions stemming from false stories about her liaisons. She seeks to change her public image, despite being told by the studio publicist, Space Hanlon (Lee Tracy) that romantic scandal is what her adoring public wants. Burns tries unsuccessfully over the course of the movie to replace the image of herself from that of a sexually aggressive woman to the picture of the girl next door. Hanlon does everything he can to undermine Burns’s efforts and to continue promoting her image as a free-spirited woman.  

Bombshell offered a revelation about the activities within the studio and in the life of a movie star. The movie made fun of the creation of star images and the assumed link between a star’s image in the movies and her or his off-screen life. Most strikingly, the movie depicted a female movie star whose studio wanted her to lead a Hollywood player existence. In its opening montage, the movie shows how a woman with this image can remain a popular star. Young and old commuters, housewives, and other people appear, eagerly reading a series of newspaper headlines that catalogue Burns’s crossing the boundaries of sexual propriety. In the view of the director Victor Fleming and screenwriters John Lee Mahin and Jules Furthman, a spectrum of audience members enjoyed the Hollywood player antics and wanted to know the details about their favorite star's activities in Hollywood. The movie industry insiders behind Bombshell portrayed the studio publicity department actively promoting a star image of an actress as an unmarried woman having sex, sometimes with married men.

Critics generally praised the movie. Calling it adroit, markedly clever, and one of the best comedies of life in Hollywood, reviewers praised the cast’s performances as well. The reviewers considered Burns a temperamental star who dabbled in everything, including relationships. They enjoyed the publicist character and relished the way he humorously used Burns's pseudorelationships and his imagination to grab any front-page headlines that he could. The public expressed mixed reactions. Although the movie did well in the big cities on the first week, it did not prove to have the box office power to last there for long. The movie grossed excellent box office receipts in midsized and smaller cities across the country. It allowed audiences to view Lola Burns as a sexy, wild woman, yet having her attempt to change this image made it easier for audiences to like and accept her. Burns became the good bad woman, an obvious fantasy figure for many men but also one for those women who wanted to play this part.

By the early 1940s, the depiction of Hollywood players behind the scenes became much more infrequent. This change occurred because the industry as well as the U.S. Government sought to diminish its focus upon Hollywood as a separate community during World War II. They established a branch of the Office of War Information to oversee the motion picture industry's output and located it in the center of Hollywood. The local government increased its policing activities. The Los Angeles Police Commission began reviewing nightclub performances before issuing the licenses that allowed the shows to appear. The first act they stopped was by Julian Eltinge, a popular female impersonator who had a great following among Hollywood movie stars. In addition, the understanding of the definition of homosexuals changed by the early 1940s, making this large group of Hollywood players less humorous and thus less useful to the entertainment industry.

One of the last female Hollywood player images of the era appeared in Ann Bell’s 1940 novel Lady’s Lady. Lotus, a female star who finds the studio lot conducive to her sexual interests, falls deeply in love with Bunny, a woman she has picked from among the hundreds of extras while filming a scene in a movie. Bunny sleeps with Lotus but the extra’s coolness causes the star to plead for renewed affection.

My heart is aching. Whenever I close my eyes, I can see you in my imagination with other girls. I had planned and hoped never to have any more heartaches, but the way I feel about you is pitiable. I would give my life to be with you this very moment, just to feel you near me, to drift in the dreamland of heavenly bliss for only a few minutes. I would be happy if you would allow me to be with you once again . . . but regardless of anything and everything, I wish and am longing to hear your voice again. Darling, may I?

This novel presented the sound stage as a place for performers to fulfill their romantic interests. Readers learned that a star could walk around the stage and exchange glances with hundreds of extra girls to decipher their level of interest to her and in her. The representation indicated that a star expressed little concern about engaging in this activity and exhibited little fear that one of these extra women or other studio workers might object to her Hollywood player activities. While Bunny might not have wanted to pursue the relationship beyond one night, her response to Lotus’s letter makes it clear that Lotus could have chosen a different girl to fulfill her romantic desires. Lotus may fail to retain Bunny’s love, but she maintains her position as a movie star and continues to receive the income and adulation associated with her status. Lotus has free reign of the studio to pursue her homosexual interests and faces no overt condemnation for this activity. The story also suggests that an unheralded ex-
tra could find romance with a wealthy, popular star, adding a Cinderella promise to romance behind the scenes in Hollywood.

Cross-dressing, free-spirited, and homosexual women appeared on the movie studio lots in downtown Hollywood, Culver City, and other neighboring areas. They lounged in their men’s clothing, decorated their dressing rooms in masculine severity, and sought liaisons and potential relationships on studio stage sets. These women and their activities received a public presence through their appearance in the media. These depictions added to the mystique of Hollywood behind the scenes by bringing the taboo and forbidden pleasures to the mystery and glamour that dominated depictions of the studios as a workplace.

The Hollywood players had an extraordinary run of two decades. The depictions illustrated that the phenomenon’s mass-produced cultural capital offered women who defied gender and sexual norms many places where they could act upon those interests. The Hollywood movie industry, its observers, and the organizations that reported on this world presented Hollywood players to the public, positioning media sources as places where the women also had a public presence. Media sources, as shapers of Hollywood’s cultural image, used these images to add the taboo and forbidden pleasures to the mystique associated with these Hollywood locations.

The female Hollywood players appeared as successfully integrated into the Los Angeles-Hollywood world. They drank and dined in the restaurants and nightclubs in downtown Hollywood and along Sunset Boulevard. The women expressed their personalities in their homes in central Hollywood, along the Boulevard, and in the exclusive residential district of the Hollywood Hills. They partied with the upper echelon of the movie industry at private parties in the Hollywood Hills and in chic Malibu Beach. They pursued their personal interests in the dressing rooms and on the sets at the studio lots. The lifestyles they led raise issues about urban life for scholars of women, gender, and sexuality to consider.

The presentation of the Hollywood players offered them a public presence in the culture. As celebrity figures, many of the players likely attracted audience members’ attention, and their words and deeds appeared more seductive to emulate. In the increasingly urbanized United States of the era, with its expanding mass-produced culture, the Hollywood players appeared as figures of a vibrant present and an exciting future. Unlike what scholars have previously found, that nonconformist figures that appeared in movies, literature, and newspapers led horrific lives, the media images of female Hollywood players leading successful lives offered audience members examples of alternative life-styles that could be rich and rewarding. The players demonstrated that cultural gender and sexual norms did not represent the precipice beyond which lay an abyss of misery. This offered audience members, particularly those who crossed the boundaries themselves, great excitement and relief. This element in the representation of women in the media deserves further investigation.

The examples I have presented and others I have found indicate that the studios purposely created and presented Hollywood player images. Newspapers, magazines, and the novels and movies about the motion picture industry in Hollywood presented them. As portrayed in Bombshell, young and old women and men bought the consumer products that the stars endorsed to identify with them, read the banner headlines of their activities to be in the know, pored over the feature articles and novels to acquire details about the players and their lives, and watched the movies that featured the player images to fantasize about them. The most striking images in the montage that opens Bombshell included one woman and one man, each lying down in their homes dreaming, with a fan magazine featuring Burns draped over their torsos. Clearly, racy, risqué, and shocking images comprised part of the dream of Hollywood for some in the audience.

Then, as now, the movie studios pushed the envelope of culturally acceptable images to generate more attention and business. Movie makers, along with the Hollywood novelists and newspaper writers, used the images as a way to entertain but also to describe and explain their Hollywood world. Together, these groups’ use of Hollywood players helped forge the mystique of Hollywood’s locations and the movie capital in general.

NOTES


11. More recently, works have noted that publicity on particular stars, such as Marlene Dietrich and Clark Gable, suggested that nonconformist behavior might account for some of their popularity. Hollywood players included a wide array of movie industry workers who found Hollywood filled with places and opportunities to act outside conventions. Patty Fox, *Star Style: Hollywood Legends as Fashion Icons* (Los Angeles: Angel City Press, 1995); Samantha Barbas, *Movie Crazy: Fans, Stars and the Cult of Celebrity* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 150–56.


19. The teaser campaign of what was happening behind the picture studios proved alluring to customers. Eastern, Midwestern, and far Western cities provided strong box office returns. However, it did poorly in southern cities like Louisville and Birmingham. Motion Picture Herald, June 18, 1932, 35; Film Daily, June 22, 1932; Variety, June 28, 1932; July 12, 1932; July 19, 1932; July 26, 1932; August 16, 1932.

20. Herbert Cruikshank, “Director Dorothy: The One Woman Behind the Stars,” Motion Picture Classic 30, (September 1929): 76; Los Angeles Times, September 18, 1927, sec. 3; February 9, 1936, sec. 3; June 9, 1935, sec. 3; August 16, 1936, sec. 3; Los Angeles Evening Herald, November 15, 1932 sec. B.


22. Grace Kingsley, “Hobnobbing in Hollywood,” Los Angeles Times, January 2, 1933, sec. 2; January 25, 1933, sec. 2. As the contracts of both director Josef von Sternberg and Dietrich approached their end, most of the studio’s executives wanted to break up this pairing. Dietrich’s last motion picture in 1932, Blonde Venus, earned enthusiastic reviews and lackluster box office returns. The top executives released von Sternberg and strove to get Dietrich into another picture before her contract expired. Dietrich responded to the idea of working with another director and agreed to act in the motion picture two days later and received a new five-year contract. Donald Spoto, The Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 100–102.


24. Harrison Carroll, “Stars, Design Advocate Figure to Match Styles,” Los Angeles Times, January 6, 1933.

25. Jimmy Starr, “Football Season Past, Film Folk Turn Toward Polo,” Los Angeles Evening Herald and Express, March 22, 1933, sec. B.


30. The song in its entirety follows: “When beautiful Lillian Russell put on a great big bustle she glorified the backbone of a Nation! I wore it! I wore it! And made the world adore it! It started the first inflation. When Madame Sara Bernhardt wore the Hobble skirt I was the very first to Hobble on Broadway. I’ve always had a passion to wear the latest fashion. That’s why I have to look like this today.” Chorus: “I’m one of the boys, one of the boys.” Second Refrain: “I’m one of the boys, just one of the boys. I ... are BVD’s. I’m one of the boys, girls, I’m one of the boys. I handle a big cigar with manly poise. Once I was maternal.” Third Refrain: “What Price Hollywood? directed by George Cukor (1932, RKO).”


32. Variety predicted that the craze in Hollywood would end in 1933. Variety, November 21, 1933, 59. Historian George Chauncey also believes that most of the spark in the pansy craze diminished with the passing of the ordinance law barring cross-
dressing in local night clubs and bars in 1933, although he observes that the craze continued for two more years before either the discovery or enforcement of the ordinance led to the demise of the clubs. Chauncey, Gay New York, 321.


35. Herbert Howe, “A Misunderstood Woman: She’s Addressed as Madame Nazimova, but One Thinks of Her as Naz,” Photoplay (April, 1922), 19.


38. Quote comes from an unidentified clipping in Alla Nazimova file; Anne Prior Scott, Natural Allies: Women’s Associations In American History (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 141–50; Cott, Grounding of Modern Feminism, 197–201. Feminist advocates offered compromise solutions about motherhood, which did not fully offset the professional and salary risks and other issues that this path entailed. Most career advocates supported the gender norms of wife and mother, and these advocates viewed women’s jobs as acceptable when this work aimed to improve family life. Most creative women argued that being a mother helped their creative energy and provided grist for their mill.


44. Alma Whitaker, “Change Her Name? Well, Mercedes Just Refuses,” Los Angeles Times, December 27, 1931, sec. 3.

45. Whitaker, “Change Her Name?”


47. Both quotes from Whitaker, “Change Her Name?”

48. Los Angeles Times, December 27, 1931, sec. 3. As a gender role, the position of mother dramatically influenced the opportunities that women have had to enter the cultural, political, and social worlds in the United States. During this era opponents of women’s involvement in these worlds used motherhood to deny women the opportunity to enter those realms. As noted earlier, an ideology of motherhood enabled some women to enter these worlds during the Progressive era, if their activities stayed within those areas where the ideology could justify women’s involvement. Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne Publications, 1982).


52. D.L.M., review of Laughter Limited, by Nina Putnam, Boston Evening Transcript, November 4, 1922, sec. 5; Springfield Republican, October 29, 1922.


55. Readers recognized the petting party as a reality in their lives. The mid-1920s Lynds study of Middletown, Indiana, revealed that many high school boys and girls had been to these affairs and engaged in kissing and light petting. Scholar Paula Fass observed that many college women of the era had this experience also. Their peers, particularly among women, used social pressure to place limits on how “far” the sexual activities would go, even with the man that they intended to marry. Frederick Lewis


57. Edwin Schallert, “Star Invasion: Stars New Boom at Malibu,” Los Angeles Times, June 4, 1933, sec. 2. At the time of the newspaper article the owners in Malibu Beach were directors John Stahl, David Butler, William Le Baron, and Frank Capra, actors Alexander Kirkland, George Raft, Norman Foster, Stephen Gooson, and studio executives Jack Warner and Bud Schulberg.


61. Bombshell (MGM, 1933); Katz, The Film Encyclopedia.


63. Thomas Cripps, Hollywood’s High Noon: Moviemaking and Society Before Television (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1997); Los Angeles Herald Examiner, January 17, 1940; “Application of Julian Eltinge to operate as a female impersonator at the Hollywood Rendezvous,” January 16, 1940, The Official Minutes of The Board of Police Commissioners of the City of Los Angeles, January 2, 1940 to June 28, 1940. See Chauncey and Kennedy and Davis for more explanation of this change in cultural perception.

64. Ann Bell, Lady’s Lady (New York: House of Field, 1940), 88.

Abstract: Fan magazines had a dramatic impact on actress Clara Bow’s career and on female fandom more generally. This article examines Bow’s 1927 star vehicle It as a parable for fan culture, particularly for the ways that fan magazines constructed their female readers and Hollywood films addressed their female spectators.

The word play in the title of this article hints at several aspects of consumer culture that converged around Hollywood and its products during the decade of the 1920s. “Making it” is a colloquial term of achievement, in this case by Clara Bow, whose fleeting but magnificent Hollywood success was facilitated by the popular medium of the fan magazine. The title also refers to It (Clarence Badger, 1927), a film that will forever be associated with the career and public persona of its star, Clara Bow. Finally, the title resonates in the realm of the sexual, an appropriate signification for an actress who became simultaneously a dynamic and a troubling symbol of the New Woman of the 1920s.

What follows situates Bow’s star identity in the context of widespread concerns in the 1920s about Hollywood’s influence on a fantastical kind of female sexuality represented in many of the magazines and films of the day, thereby demonstrating the interrelatedness of movie and other consumer cultures. Clara Bow is just one of many stars of the decade whose extraordinary—and often highly editorialized—life became a market commodity, sold by both the movie and fan magazines that purported to disclose every aspect of stars’ lives. Robert Sklar explains that by the end of the 1920s, “movie players could speak to the public about their divorces and love affairs with at least some of the frankness they used among themselves.” This tacit and reciprocal encouragement of publicity stood in direct contrast to the late-nineteenth-century belief that curiosity about the personal affairs of others—even public figures—was crude and improper. But by the 1920s, curiosity had been institutionalized and in effect normalized, at least in relation to the movie industry, whose studios and fan magazines fed the public information (however fabricated) about stars’ lives. But this legitimation of gossip came at a substantial price: those celebrities who participated in the publicity machine often found themselves possessed of a permanently public life, so much so that—as with Clara Bow—maintaining truly private lives became untenable.

Fan magazines, as what follows shall demonstrate, serve as crucial repositories of information about celebrity making and unmaking in the 1920s. Fan magazines

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are also an important resource for understanding 1920s notions of female consumption—of images, of products, and of films. In addition to examining the role fan magazines played in the mythologizing of Hollywood and its stars, this article uses It to situate Bow in the context of Hollywood’s influence on women’s commercial culture. Bow is a particularly suitable subject for anyone concerned with women’s roles in the silent-film era not only because It documents the production of women’s cultural identities but also because Bow’s reputation hinged so greatly on the fictional identity of her on-screen roles in general, and on this role in particular. Bow’s association with this film was so complete that a decade after making It, well into the sound period and after the peak of Bow’s fame, the actress opened a restaurant on North Vine Street in Hollywood—the “It Café”—yet another (ultimately unsuccessful) site for the consumption of Bow’s “It” girl leftovers.

**The Cycle of the Fan Magazine: Seeing versus Being**

Women are less markedly affected by acting than are men. Women are always acting more or less, anyway, whether they are professionals or not.

Dr. Louis E. Bisch, *Photoplay*, January 1928

Clara Bow’s rise and fall in Tinseltown were meteoric. She inauspiciously arrived in Hollywood in 1923. By the late 1920s, she was receiving more fan mail than any other star. By 1931, however, *Movie Classic* magazine had published an article about her entitled “Can She Ever Come Back?” Bow made fourteen films in 1925, eight in 1926, six in 1927, four in 1928, three in 1929, four in 1930, and only four between 1931 and 1933, when she made her final appearance in Frank Lloyd’s *Hoopla*, retiring permanently at the age of twenty-eight. She received forty-five thousand fan letters a week at the peak of her career in 1929, a period during which henna sales tripled as a result of adoring fans who wanted their hair to be the wild red color of Clara Bow’s. Such “colorful” knowledge could have been gained only through fan magazine articles and pictures, since Bow’s films were, of course, in black and white.

Perusing early fan magazines, one frequently encounters readers’ questions about the color of stars’ hair and eyes. Wanting to know what the stars “really” looked like, fans were pushing for a visual realism that the cinema could not provide; the fan magazines were more than willing to offer this information in their pages, creating a discourse that shaped fans’ perceptions of stars and made their personal lives appear accessible and real, however otherworldly and fantastic. Details about her hair color, favorite perfume, and so on also served to make Bow an imitable commodity, as is evident in the increase in henna sales in the late 1920s. Not only were the details of the star’s life made public, they “belonged” to the public and were made readily available—purchaseable is perhaps a more accurate way to put it—through the medium of the fan magazine.

Bow’s turbulent tenure in Hollywood certainly demonstrates the reciprocal nature of stardom and fan magazine culture during the 1920s. Her particular story begins with the Brewster Publications contest that appeared in the January 1921 issue of *Motion Picture* magazine. “The Fame and Fortune Contest of 1921” used a catchy slogan—“HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF”—to solicit photographs from aspiring aspirants. The history referred to in the announcement is the highly successful (according to the magazine) contest of the previous year. The slogan suggests the fan magazine’s interest in tapping into the creative fantasy lives of its readers. In particular, the contest attests to the (at least symbolic, if not realistic) opportunities the behaviors of fandom opened up for the fan magazine reader.

“Fans have historically been defined as those who respond to the stas system” and thereby as passive, “brought into (enthralled) existence by the modern celebrity system, via the mass media.” The contest, however, endowed its participants with a sense of active involvement, although it did so in a deliberately misleading fashion: “The Golden Key of Opportunity Is In Your Hands—Turn the Key in the Doorway of Success and thru the portal of the Fame and Fortune Contest you may enter the kingdom of the screen.” The language of the contest promised fans a chance—however remote—to transform themselves into the images they gazed at in the pages of the magazine and, more important, on the so-called silver screen; the language was of the cinema-age fairy tale, and the reader was the imagined princess.

The “Fame and Fortune Contest” also unites issues of spectatorship, consumerism, and celebrity. The very desire to move beyond the passive position of “seeing” to the active position of “being” reveals much about the psychological import of celebrity in American culture, particularly as it relates to an understanding of female participation in that culture. Miriam Hansen has approached “the questions of spectatorship from the perspective of the public sphere,” asserting that “the cinema became a powerful vehicle for reproducing spectators as consumers, an apparatus for binding desire and subjectivity in consumerist forms of social identity.” The *Motion Picture* contest revises—but does not negate—such a conceptualization by “binding desire and subjectivity” beyond the strictly consumerist discourse embodied and endorsed by the fan magazines. By enabling individuals to ponder their own personal transformation, if only on the level of fantasy, the contest reproduces spectators not only as consumers but as actors, giving them the opportunity to recreate themselves by literally sending their images into the public domain. In other words, this contest—and others like it—enabled fans to experiment with ideas of personal revision, of moving beyond the more passive role of spectator by “turn[ing] the key in the doorway of success.”

Bow thus stood as a symbol for the many who remained on the other side of the portal, a symbol of both the promise and the pretense of the necessarily exclusive star system. She is a reminder of the cinema’s ability to transform the spectator, here quite literally. By the 1920s there was a general understanding that spectators could be influenced by both on-screen images and by the discourse contained within the pages of the fan magazine. The female *film spectator* was thus interrelated in these pages, for, as Richard de Cordova points out, “we call stars movie stars no doubt because of the primary importance we attach to their appearance in films (we do not call them magazine stars).”
The female fan magazine reader was an obvious extension of the female film spectator; the former desired and pursued information to supplement the limited extratextual information provided by the films themselves. Hansen claims that there is a discernible lineage of female spectatorship that “can be traced through concrete historical manifestation in which women not only experienced the misfit of the female spectator in relation to patriarchal positions of subjectivity but also developed imaginative strategies in response to it.”

Such imaginative strategies, I would like to suggest, are offered in the pages of the fan magazines, as in the case of Motion Picture’s “Fame and Fortune” contests. Viewed in this fashion, Clara Bow’s participation in the contest was an active (if prepackaged) mode of response to cinematic images, one that had radical consequences for her position as both spectator and consumer. When she became a star herself, Bow dramatically shifted from the consumerist mode suggested by Hansen to become an object (and agent) of consumption.

Fan magazine contests enabled and encouraged women to reevaluate themselves in response to the star system and to articulate their fantasies in tangible ways through their participation. Fan letters, which materialized when fans sought stars’ studio addresses from magazine editors, also make material fans’ desire to emerge from anonymity, to create a concrete existence for themselves in relation to the star system. In providing an outlet or means for such fantasies, the fan magazines were, of course, in no way subversive; rather, they were part of the mechanism of fandom that developed out of a spectatorial demand for information, created in part by the industry itself. But while fan magazines were thus imbued with Hollywood’s market-driven ideology, they still offered a practical way for women to become actively involved with movie culture and, in the process, to negotiate their own identities beyond the limited realm of their day-to-day experiences. As Gaylyn Studlar points out, “This preparation in narrative left women free to contemplate other elements of the text: the stars.”

While I agree with Studlar’s premise, it is necessary to add that female spectators who were actively engaged with fan magazine culture turned their contemplation not only to the stars on-screen but to themselves as well. The very existence and nature of fan magazines necessitated that their readers consider themselves connected to the greater celebrity discourse, for so much of the content of these magazines revolved around creating personal desires in their readers—for things, for styles, and for self-assessment. Thus, when Studlar concludes that “fan magazine discourse of the 1920s did not encourage a total investment in an illusion but appears largely predicated on the assumption that women could participate in an engagement in the cinema that might include, for lack of a better term, a ‘fetishistic’ pleasure,” it follows logically that this pleasure was and is consumerist in nature.

The fetish Studlar invokes has everything to do with the interplay between individual lack and ideal objects of desire that are created by the perfect images of stardom. This fetishistic pleasure, in other words, could not exist were there not an immense—but not too immense—disparity and desire between spectator/reader and star/text. The fan magazines were advertisements, and their pitch was attainability: if you buy this, you can be like star X. Bow made such aspirations look particularly possible because she failed to create the distance between herself and her fans that other stars worked rigorously to achieve. She was in many ways the star system’s best advertisement precisely because she perpetuated the illusion of possibility for fans.

The fan magazines of the 1920s, costing anywhere from five to twenty-five cents and with circulations of almost half a million each, created an alternative discourse to that found in the firmly upper-middle-class, family-oriented periodicals, such as the immensely popular Ladies Home Journal. Movie stars became the leisure time diversions of working girls and the stuff of their fantasies. The subject matter of Bow’s films usually reflected the social status of these fans—working girls with sufficient wages but even bigger dreams. These “New Women,” as they were called, existed in a curious era of stasis and change; they challenged gendered social divisions with their behavior, alerting the world to their “newness” through bold visual statements in the form of shorter haircuts and skirt lengths. Although its origins reside in the late nineteenth century, the term “New Woman” was, over the course of the twentieth century, applied to virtually every generation of women who appeared to rebel against accepted standards for gendered behavior. The cause of so much spilled ink in the popular press during the 1920s, New Women (who were, of course, not as homogeneous as the term implies, although they were often spoken of in this collective fashion) were asking to be looked at and to look in ways that defied expectations while creating new ones.

As just one example of the gender changes that occurred throughout the decade, in 1921, the same Elinor Glyn who a few years later would create the “It” label that defined the era and its wild child, Clara Bow, wrote an article for Cosmopolitan entitled “What’s the Matter with You American Women?” This interrogational early-twenties piece is replete with anxiety over women’s liberated and promiscuous behavior, which Glyn perceived as threatening the character of American women across the board: “Has the American girl no innate modesty—no subconscious self-respect, no reserve, no dignity? I know what I think of them.” According to Glyn, American women needed to attend to their “chastity, mental and physical,” to reject the “age of the body” in order to nurture their neglected spirits.

The disparity between Glyn’s two pieces, published less than a decade apart, is symbolic of the tremendous changes witnessed during the 1920s, both in women’s roles and the culture’s evaluation of their new attitudes, appearance, and actions. As Kevin Starr notes in his discussion of 1920s Hollywood, “Hollywood emerged in the American consciousness as the major source of imagery and energy for the sexual revolution.” Bow became a symbol of all the behavioral possibilities opened up by women’s post-suffrage liberation, for this was an era dominated by prosperity and gaiety, particularly in the cinema’s depiction of the contemporary world.
Movies helped create the nation’s mood, luring postwar audiences into theaters with films that embodied and begat excitement, fun, and the spirit of rampant consumerism.

The relationship between spectatorship and consumption was also clearly not limited to movie audiences but had logical consequences for the fan magazine reader. Kathryn Fuller demonstrates how Photoplay editor James Quirk used the movies to create “a breed of ‘perfect consumers’ who were almost completely dependent on motion pictures to generate their needs and desires. Quirk predicted that the persuasiveness of the motion picture medium, coupled with the added weight of product endorsements by movie stars, would fuel an explosive growth of consumer culture led by movie fans.” Following Quirk’s logic, spectatorship and consumerism converged in the figure of the female fan. Fuller aptly claims that such assumptions reflect both Quirk’s and the other fan magazine editors’ “growing awareness of women’s purchasing power.” With increasing numbers of women entering the job market and becoming wage earners, women were being taken seriously as economic forces, particularly, it seems, by the movie industry.

Considering the actual content of the fan magazines, this argument becomes much more complicated. While their premise was to disseminate information about stars, their content reflects the gender politics of the era quite vividly. The tumultuous post-suffrage Jazz Age was not lacking in debates over women’s social position. However, the 1920s New Woman was notably different from her late-nineteenth-century counterpart in two important ways: her class and her sexuality. The 1920s New Woman, at least as she was configured by the popular press, was largely working class, like the shop girl that Bow plays in her definitive role; furthermore, the New Woman’s sexual behavior was much more visible, less un-speakable, and therefore more subject to debate. Women’s lives were becoming increasingly more public, made so not only by employment and wages but also through such “acceptable” leisure activities as moviegoing.

Even the movie industry’s standard, Photoplay, participated in the debate over women’s rapidly changing roles in the family and society in its monthly column “Girls’ Problems.” But it was through countless stories of stars’ lives, fashions, makeup, hair, love, and homes that fan magazines created a litany of identificatory modes for their readers. The ideological implications of these magazines and their content are unusually clear: readers not only wanted to know about the stars; they wanted to be (like) the stars as well. If such thinking sounds familiar, it is because it is the same logic on which theories of spectatorial identification have been built. Despite their obvious differences, the strategies of spectatorial consumption and identification employed by the fan magazines and the movies are remarkably similar. It should therefore come as no surprise that when Clara Bow fought her way through that doorway of “Fame and Fortune,” she became one of the many stars imitated by her countless fans. As Budd Schulberg puts it in his memoir, “Clara Bow became not just a top box-office star but a national institution: The It Girl. Millions of followers wore their hair like Clara’s and pouted like Clara, and danced and smoked and laughed and looked like Clara.”

Schulberg articulates the behavioral influence that was part of the nature of female spectatorship as it was constructed through fan discourse. Bow, who came to stand for this sexualized “type” of New Woman behaving outside the conventional bounds of womanhood, paved the way for many of her adoring imitators by becoming a model for identification and mimicry. According to Dr. Bisch’s problematic assertion in the epigraph to this section, women are always acting, always performing. Such notions of female behavior are suspect, of course, yet fan culture did everything to foster such mimicry. While the sexuality of Bow’s characters, as we shall see in the analysis of It that follows, can in many ways be considered liberating inasmuch as they often (but not always) defied the conservative strictures that still held sway over the vast majority of American women, in her real-life affairs and scandals, Bow lacked the moral certitude of her cinematic counterparts. As Bow’s name popped into and out of the scandal sheets, Paramount offered her a series of cookie-cutter roles that fed the public’s perception of Bow as a real-life accumulation of her on-screen roles. This was particularly true of the film whose title still remains inextricably linked to Bow’s persona: It.

What Is It?: Locating the Gaze of the New Woman

Entertainment was conceived up in the Garden of Eden. Eve gave the first show the day she slipped into a fig leaf. Adam, the audience, enjoyed himself so much, that he decided to go into show business. From then on, shows were made by men for men.

Beth Brown, Moving Picture World

Clara Bow’s film It can be understood as a parable about fan culture, particularly the ways that fan magazines constructed female readers and Hollywood films positioned female spectators. It is replete with the interplay between plenitude and lack, with the elemental bases of spectatorial identification, and with the processes of personal reevaluation that were central to the machinations of female fandom in the 1920s. Like fan culture, which encouraged women to imagine and, on occasion, to act out, certain fantasies about their identities in relation to star culture, It enacts a fantastic narrative of female sexual aggression and class transcendence.

It was a cinematic response to the resignification of this previously innocuous pronoun by Elinor Glyn, whose fictional story—its kind of treatise on “It”—sparked extensive discussion of what “It” was and who had “It.” Glyn was given a cameo role in It and became part of the propaganda machine for the film, whose catchy title and general concept derived from Glyn’s story. As Lori Landay has pointed out in reference to Glyn’s marketing of the idea of “It,” the cultural phenomenon she started demonstrates the commodification of ideas and feminine public personas in the emerging mass consumer culture of the 1920s. The film aptly demonstrates such intersections of female identity and mass culture by exemplifying both formally and contextually the status of the New Woman, primarily through the device of the gaze.

Contrary to Beth Brown’s edenic metaphor for Hollywood, It is a film that invites the gaze of its female spectator, largely to identify with the film’s heroine.
and with her decidedly sexualized and empowered modes of seeing and being. The film celebrates its female star’s rebellion against traditional modes of passivity and complicates her relationship to the process of objectification. In other words, It seems every bit as much made for the male gaze as for its often neglected female counterpart.

It depicts the career of Betty Lou (Clara Bow) and her romantic pursuit of Cyrus Waltham (Antonio Moreno), whom she will eventually acquire. Paramount Pictures, 1927.

Figure 1. The opening shot of It invokes the film’s consumer-driven narrative by referencing both the store where Betty Lou (Clara Bow) works as a salesgirl and the man, Cyrus Waltham (Antonio Moreno), whom she will eventually acquire. Paramount Pictures, 1927.

Waltham’s department store, in which the narrative in It is located, formalizes the spectatorial constructs of the film, for it is a space (just like a movie theater) where one is expected to look, to desire, and to experience pleasure through fantasies of acquisition. This “phantasmagoric environment” is aptly demonstrated when we get our first glimpse of Betty Lou. Situated among rather undifferentiated individuals, she holds a piece of lingerie in front of her clothed body to show an older, respectable-looking couple what they might expect from their purchase. Thus, caught in the decency of the on-looking couple, whose “decorousness” justifies exposing the lingerie (or at least adds a comic element to the image’s otherwise overtly sexual suggestiveness), the film allows its spectator momentarily to enjoy looking at the wide-eyed Betty Lou with no more than a hint of the lingerie’s sexual implications. As the man and woman smile and nod, the division Hansen notes between “looking” and “having” is blurred. Since both the department store consumer and the cinema spectator are expected to desire what they see, the scene appropriately figures consumption as both an economic exchange and a mode of ideologically sanctioned visual pleasure.

This flirtatious looking is fleeting, however, for another salesgirl interrupts to tell Betty Lou that Cyrus Waltham is the “new boss.” From this moment, the film reverses the gaze so prevalent in dominant Hollywood cinema away from a male appraisal (singular or collective) of the attractive onscreen woman. Here the male character, Waltham, is situated on the passive, receiving end of the sexualized gaze. To invoke the metaphor that opened this section, Betty Lou removes her modern-day fig leaf but in so doing enables sustained scopophilic leering at her Adam. The preceding lingerie scene thus serves as a brief reminder of Betty Lou’s to-be-looked-at-ness, to borrow a well-known phrase from Laura Mulvey, because Betty Lou is hardly the visual object in this mise-en-scène. I would like to suggest that the scenes that follow enact an inversion that indicates the changing nature of the New Woman and of the institutionalization of female fandom.

The scene proceeds as a series of shot/reverse shots, atypical in that the camera’s eye recognizes only half the gaze relays—the woman’s (or women’s) half. The sequence transpires as follows: Betty Lou gets wide-eyed and stares directly at Waltham, the object of her visibly increasing desire. In the mise-en-scène of the department store, a business with the sole purpose of creating and then satisfying personal desires, Betty Lou is the ideal customer: she sees, she wants, and, in the end, she gets. But not without first undergoing some struggle, for in the reverse shot of Waltham, he is oblivious to Betty Lou’s gaze. Furthermore, Betty Lou’s desire is hardly limited to the character of Betty Lou, for so much of spectatorship has to do with the logic of consumption, as has been discussed in the first section of this article. This thematic is ideologically in line with what Hansen has deemed the relationship between the cinema and spectator culture: “Film spectatorship epitomized a tendency that strategies of advertising and consumer culture had been pursuing for decades: the stimulation of new needs and new desires through visual fascination. Besides turning visual fascination itself into a commodity, the cinema generated a metadiscourse of consumption . . . a phantasmagoric environment in which boundaries between ‘looking’ and ‘having’ were blurred.”

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desires diverge from the material objects of consumption—the things that purport to complete the lacking subject/consumer—to Waltham himself, a man who in many ways represents the sum total of consumerism, the star, if you will, of the commodity system.

The next reverse shot shows Betty Lou still agog, with nine more female clerks behind her in similar stages of ogling. Betty Lou is up front with her chin on her hand, enjoying the act of looking to an unusual degree and for an unusually sustained duration for a female character—hers is an unabashed voyeurism; one might even suggest it is a proud display of her visual pleasure. In yet another reverse shot of Waltham, he remains oblivious to the fact that he is the focus of this spectacle. A medium shot of Betty Lou follows with the intertitle “Sweet Santa Claus, give me him!” This scene articulates many issues concerning 1920s women’s behavior in a concise series of shots that empower Betty Lou with an active, consuming look while relegating Waltham to the status of the unknowing and sexualized spectacle.

This visual empowerment of Betty Lou can be understood as an inversion of the politics of looking in the cinema, which has relied on the spectacle of women and the privileging of the male gaze. Paramount Pictures, 1927.

The press kit perpetuates the idea of women as the object of the gaze and suggests that whatever reversals might take place in the film, entrenched standards of representation remain unchanged. Removed from its cinematic context, the image of a group of men staring at Clara Bow seems perfectly natural in the context of her career. In fact, the press kit image says more about Clara Bow as a star than about Betty Lou as a character, for Bow’s career was utterly reliant on marketing her sexualized, visual appeal. While Betty Lou as a character initiates this scopic inversion only to reverse it by fighting her way into Waltham’s visual register, Clara Bow the actress seemed hard-pressed to exist outside the intense visual scrutiny of the public and the studios. This is, no doubt, why Bow later in her life removed herself to the Nevada desert, where she could gain the kind of anonymity that would have impeded the spectacular nature of Betty Lou’s romantic conquest.

But It presents more than just a reversal of the status quo, a transposition of the traditional male role with that of the traditional female. On the one hand, the scene of Betty Lou and the other shop girls staring at Waltham is hardly that radical, for the film’s premise still revolves around a classed inequity that is linked to Betty Lou’s “type” (the independent working girl) as well as to Waltham’s (the rich capitalist man), the end result being, predictably, marriage and a reconciliation of this divide. There is also a tacit understanding that while Betty Lou appears to be
a relatively carefree working girl, she would rather be an otherwise-occupied wife of a rich businessman. She is, in other words, a working girl only because she has to be. She sells lingerie but ultimately sells herself, even if this transaction is seemingly enacted on her terms. On the other hand, the scene does suggest something important about the nature of the 1920s woman precisely because Betty Lou is able to look, desire, and pursue without being punished or condemned. In fact, by film's end she is substantially rewarded—materially, emotionally, and morally—for her aggressive behavior.

Ultimately, the gift that Betty Lou receives is Waltham, but Santa has little to do with this acquisition. Rather, it is Betty Lou's ability to perform that enables her to capture Waltham's previously absent gaze and to consolidate her active, aggressive modes of seeing and being with a retained, albeit revised, sense of femininity. As spectators, we join Betty Lou as she experiences the various impediments to her pursuit of her wealthy man. In ... gazes in which he is an unknowing and unseeing object; and she must reposition herself as an object in order to gain her object. So when Waltham wanders by Betty Lou's lingerie counter with his back to her and then leans on a piece of fabric, Betty Lou gets an ingenious look on her face and pulls the fabric in an attempt to attract his gaze. Her desire is to direct Waltham, but she fails here (as she does in successive attempts) as he nonchalantly proceeds.

It takes Waltham's bumbling and foppish pal Monty (William Austin)—who is on a mission to find an “It Girl” in the store after reading the Glyn piece in *Cosmopolitan*—to detect “It” in Betty Lou. This is one of several moments in *It* that suggest the degree to which print culture mediates desire. Paramount Pictures, 1927.

In the case of *It*, we are presented with precisely this scenario of lack and completion. As empowering as Betty Lou's active looking may appear to be, to realize her goal, she needs to complete what has been absent by attracting Waltham's gaze: she must get him to actively complete the companion shot to the earlier relay of gazes in which he is an unknowing and unseeing object; and she must reposition herself as an object in order to gain her object. So when Waltham wanders by Betty Lou's lingerie counter with his back to her and then leans on a piece of fabric, Betty Lou gets an ingenious look on her face and pulls the fabric in an attempt to attract his gaze. Her desire is to direct Waltham, but she fails here (as she does in successive attempts) as he nonchalantly proceeds.

Meanwhile, Betty Lou's hyperbolic desire is isolated and unique, leading us to wonder about her particular lack of decorum and passivity, attributes that have historically been associated with proper women's behavior, particularly in the public sphere.

It presents a world in which it is not only possible but acceptable to behave in this unabashed fashion. As Landay points out, "It" participated in the construction of a public femininity that depended on women's active satisfaction of their desires, an ideal that encouraged women to participate in the public sphere as consumers as well as commodities. In the character of Betty Lou, *It* presents an ideal of spectatorship made literal: like the department store consumer, she sees, she wants, and she gets. But while this last component of possession remains safely in the realm of fantasy for the film spectator, whose pleasure is based on the constant deferral of desire, Betty Lou acts out the spectator's fantasies by becoming aggressive, plotting, and sexually predatory without apology. Herein lies the basis for the satisfaction provided by the fan magazine contests: they alleviated that chronic postponement of fan adoration by allowing spectators/readers to do something; so too did the star-endorsed products that fans were encouraged to purchase in order to live like the stars did. Bow's characters were appealing for...
precisely the same reason: they enabled audiences to experience a kind of sexual liberation and moral reward that was simply not available in such a neat, coherent fashion outside the realm of fiction. While changes had certainly taken place in women’s behavior during the 1920s, only in Hollywood could notions of the New Womanhood be taken to such a sanctioned extreme.

Betty Lou’s “newness” is precisely what makes her so attractive to Monty and, eventually, to Waltham. Female desire—be it sexual or economic in nature—is legitimized through Betty Lou’s persona of the unabashed modern woman. In her behavior, Betty Lou, as a model for the female spectator, constitutes the triumph of feminine independence over the constraints of class and culture; but this is, of course, only a fictional transcendence. Her role validates the fantasies of spectators and fandom discussed earlier in this article, and although the film reflects some of the culture’s permissiveness in terms of new modes of women’s behavior, it is far from a documentary reflection of some new American sexual liberation. Rather, the film—like the fan magazine contest that propelled Clara Bow to fame—provided an opportunity for women to fantasize about engaging in rule-shattering behavior, to identify with a fantastical sexual identity that was simply impossible (and possibly even undesirable) for the vast majority of women.

Nonetheless, Betty Lou’s uniqueness, particularly her willingness to ignore convention, is unquestionably appealing in the context of the film. The film proceeds as an examination of all those things that make Betty Lou different, and as a result desirable, as the spectator is increasingly aligned with her ambitious pursuit of Waltham. Her foil, Adela Van Norman (Jacqueline Gadsdon), is everything Betty Lou is not: rich, well dressed, well mannered, reserved, and perfectly predictable. But Betty Lou’s presence reveals that Adela is no more than an outdated type. Betty Lou, who has to improvise her evening wear, who cannot read a menu in French, and who would prefer going to Coney Island over the Ritz, is appealing precisely because she defies Waltham’s expectations of bourgeois womanhood.

While it takes some work to capture Waltham’s gaze, Betty Lou controls the remaining action of the film in virtually every scene: when Monty offers her a ride home, she pushes him onto her crowded double-decker bus (much to his surprise and consternation); when Monty asks if she would like to have dinner, she agrees on the condition that he take her to the place where Waltham is planning to dine; when her roommate, an unwed mother, is unable to care for the baby, Betty Lou charges in and claims the baby as her own despite the stigma attached to single motherhood. Her character’s dynamism makes her the visual and moral center of every scene she inhabits. Her attractiveness—as an object of both desire and identification—is apparent and undeniable.

But what is it in Waltham that Betty Lou desires? Her lust for him is seemingly instantaneous, but it is mediated by both her visual assessment of his image and her knowledge of what he is: rich, the owner of the largest department store in the world. Despite Betty Lou’s resourcefulness and resource management of what she ap-
That class and desire are united in Betty Lou's lack is further evidenced when she and Monty arrive at the Ritz. The maître d' sizes up Betty Lou—as do we, aligned as we are here with the camera's perusal of her—and detects the flaws that belie her class. As she is led to a "quiet table," Betty Lou scours the restaurant, looking for Waltham; her gaze is ... the shot rapidly dollies in to a close-up on his face. Her frantic desire is evident again in the dolly; ideologically, we are aligned with Betty Lou and her quest—both visual and literal—for Waltham. When Betty Lou drags Monty to a more centrally located table, again controlling the action of the scene in her attempt to direct Waltham's gaze, she finally gets what she has been working for when the two make eye contact. Of course, once Betty Lou has attracted Waltham's advances, the rest is quick to follow.

To a certain degree their ensuing romance is predicated on Waltham's fetishization of Betty Lou's class, or, perhaps more precisely, on the way her class allows her to behave outside certain class-bound gender conventions. Betty Lou demonstrates a physicality that is absent in the affluent Adela, manifest most obviously in Betty Lou's frenetic onscreen movement. When she and Waltham go to Coney Island for their first date, at her suggestion, they dine on hot dogs and revel in the physical delights offered at the park. At the end of their date, however, when Betty Lou returns Waltham's kiss with a slap, the intertitle reads, "So you're one of those Minute Men—the minute you know a girl you think you can kiss her!" In contrast to several other Bow films from the same year, such as Victor Fleming's Hula and Dorothy Arzner's Get Your Man, "necking" is not part of the otherwise playful behavior of the New Woman in It. This is somewhat surprising, if only because, until this point, Betty Lou's interest in Waltham has been blatantly sexual.

Betty Lou's slap is an interesting nod to "the real world," to the complexity of her otherwise liberated behavior. Within the context of the narrative, her behavior is easily explicable, for hers is both a defensive and a performative reaction, defensive because she has nothing to fall back on and performative because she is, to a certain degree, acting out what she suspects she should do in response to Waltham's physical advances. It would be too facile to argue that Betty Lou's behavior in this scene is intended to serve simply as a morally correct guide for women's dating behavior, laid out by either the conservative Glyn or one of the film's heads of production. Rather, Betty Lou's behavior is an acknowledgment of the tensions between public and private, liberation and conservatism, that characterized the 1920s and its tumultuous gender politics.

My assertion that the slap is a somewhat performative reaction—one that denies what Betty Lou clearly seeks—is supported in a later scene. Immediately after the slap, Betty Lou sits in her apartment rubbing her lips, enjoying the memory of the kiss in private. However, it is only outside Waltham's presence that she can safely experience the pleasure of their interaction. To have embraced Waltham's advances would have compromised the pursuit of her goal, for Betty Lou wants nothing less than marriage, of course, and therefore is trying to conform to how she suspects a marriageable girl might behave. As Landay puts it, "It is clear that she is not satisfied by but pleased by his advance, but it is also clear that her sexual favor is not easily purchased and that she will hold out for marriage." Although Betty Lou's originality is largely what makes her able to "win" Waltham, she is not above imitating women she perceives to be her cultural superiors. During the scene at the Ritz, she notices that her rival, Adela, has pinned her corsage on her chest, not near her waist as Betty Lou has done; Betty Lou adjusts her corsage accordingly. Sarah Berry points out a related instance of "class performativity" in her discussion of Joan Crawford in The Bride Wore Red (Dorothy Arzner, 1937). This recalls the earlier scene in which Betty Lou sees the advertisement for Waltham's, if only because it reminds us that Betty Lou has the odds stacked against her because she cannot afford the trappings of the rampant consumer. Nor can she afford to let Waltham suspect that she will give in to his physical advances. When he ignores her after he mistakenly presumes she has an out-of-wedlock baby, Betty Lou thinks he is mad that she slapped him and apologizes: "I'm sorry—but a girl has to do that. You know how those things are!" Betty Lou clearly articulates that her reactions are based not on what she wants but on what she must do to survive in the modern world. Sexual freedom is revealed to be little more than an outward performance; the rules of propriety and morality appear to have changed little, even if the attire and behavior seem to suggest otherwise.

Betty Lou's behavior is consistent with Bow's own life, testament as it is to the ultimately conservative public allowance for New Womanish behavior. While the
film offers Betty Lou the traditional and safely respectable culmination of marriage. Clara Bow’s real-life affairs lacked such tidy, recuperative closure. When Monty reads the issue of *Cosmopolitan* in which the Glyn piece appears, the camera lingers on a section of text in order to define the subject of the film: “The possessor of ‘IT’ must be absolutely unself-conscious, and must have that magnetic ‘sex appeal’ which is irresistible.” Herein lies the falsity of Glyn’s concept in the context of the 1920s and of *It*, for there is nothing about Betty Lou’s “It-ness” that is unself-conscious. Rather, it is precisely the sexual nature of the New Woman’s “It” that necessitates an increasing awareness of the dangers of the “magnetic sex appeal” that Glyn claims is “It.” For examples, we need only turn to Clara Bow’s career-long lack of self-consciousness, which resulted in repeated scandals. Betty Lou’s apparent need to always consider how she is being perceived by Waltham—how she is being seen—has everything to do with the “It” of the film’s title and with her character’s ability, literally, as it turns out, to climb out of her class.

This same magnetic appeal that Betty Lou slaps away when Waltham tries to kiss her is also what Waltham thinks she has succumbed to when he falsely assumes she is an unwed mother. Although the circumstances under which Betty Lou’s roommate became pregnant are not part of the film’s narrative, Molly is certainly a cautionary figure, representing the potential casualties of the New Woman’s sexual liberation. Betty Lou escapes this fate, but only by self-consciously keeping within the traditional parameters of premarital interactions.

The New Woman of the 1920s—with her bobbed hair, flamboyant attire, and working-girl sensibilities—was still very much beholden to the sexual stric-tures of the dominant culture. As Paula Fass points out, the twenties were “a turning point, a critical juncture between the strict double standard of the age of Victoria and the permissive sexuality of the age of Freud.” Betty Lou acts out this doubleness by appearing to be both the wild, rapacious New Woman and the morally correct and conservative young lady of the past—she is, like Bow herself, at once a walking contradiction and evidence of the paradoxical nature of women’s sexual roles in the 1920s.

It is worth returning here to the already-noted fragile boundary between public and private that is as much a part of the politics of *It* as it was of the life of the movie star. The fan magazines exploited female audiences’ desire for the ingredients of movie stardom by redirecting and extending the spectatorial, consumerist gaze to their own commercial products. Ultimately, the most telling sign of “It” in *It* is a siorual manipulation of the gaze—by both Betty Lou and the female spectato- r. Although Alexander Walker contends that “‘It’ loomed with the financial independence of the young female wage-earner who wanted to acquire not social status, but sexual attractiveness to match her spending power,” Betty Lou, in fact, controls the gaze through a knowledge of her sexual attractiveness, which enables her to eventually gain social status. It is not an either/or proposition since consumption and social status remain inextricably linked in the film’s narrative. In the cases of both Betty Lou and Clara Bow, the New Woman saw and sought new paradigms for negotiating the modern world. But the paradigms themselves—of marriage and of fan culture—were already set for them.

Fan magazines, department stores, and films such as *It* all exist with the goal of creating personal desire in their readers/customers/spectators. Both Betty Lou and Clara Bow occupied such atmospheres of consumption, one of the commodity and the other of the commodified image. The fan magazines extended the fantasy world of the cinema, providing pages full of stars with extraordinary lives for ordinary women to ponder; these magazines were themselves a kind of department store catalog selling images of the stars. Clara Bow, the star commodity, existed in this fashion. Even in 1926, a fan magazine author could aptly assert that Bow “represented an investment,” concluding with the impersonal-but-true Hollywood bottom line that “an investment must be profitable.” In fact, Paramount ultimately labeled Bow’s films by the seasons: “Fall Bow,” “Spring Bow,” and so on—designations that further reinforced her status as a commodity not at all unlike those offered in the commercial realm of the department store or in the many advertisements littering the pages of fan magazines.

Notes

I first presented these ideas at the 2000 conference of the Society for Cinema Studies in Chicago. An earlier version of this article took second place in SCS’s Student Writing Award in 2001. I would like to acknowledge the thoughtful advice of Jonathan Auerbach, Jennifer Bean, Charles Caramello, Robert Kolker, Diane Negra, Devin Orgeron, David Stenn, and Jonathan Witte, as well as the invaluable resources of the Library of Congress Motion Picture Division and the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

1. Josef von Sternberg shot several unidentified scenes in the film when Badger became ill; however, von Sternberg is not credited as a codirector. Paramount produced and distributed the film.


6. The exception was Bow’s 1928 film, *Red Hair* (Clarence Badger), one of the many “lost” Bow films. According to Stenn, in *Clara Bow Runnin’ Wild*, a two-strip Technicolor process was used for the sole reason of enabling audiences to see the color of the star’s hair (128). Virtually every article on Bow discusses her hair color in detail. One contemporary fan magazine begins by commenting on “her shock of dazzling red hair”; a second begins with “Clara Bow’s hair is red and so are her fingernails”; and still another claims parenthetically that “(You’ve never seen such hair. It’s red. Just red red.).” From Alma Whitaker, “How They Manage Their Homes,” *Photoplay*, September 1929, 64+ ; Michael Woodward, “That Awful ‘IT,’” *Photoplay*, July 1939, 39+ ; and Lois Shirley, “Empty Hearted,” *Photoplay*, October 1929, 29+. It is worth noting that
on the application for the contest that Bow entered and eventually won, only two choices were given for hair color: "blonde or brunette." *Motion Picture*, January 1921, 122.

7. A good example of this shaping is evident in one of Dorothy Blum's scrapbooks at the Library of Congress Motion Picture Sound Division. In this fan's meticulously constructed two-volume homage to Joan Crawford—filled with autographed pictures, 8x10 stills, and articles from fan magazines—is a list of Crawford's "stats": height, weight, hair color, etc. At one point Blum typed in that Crawford had brown eyes, but later she crossed this out and amended it by hand to "blue," information Blum likely gathered from a fan magazine.


11. Such assumptions would ultimately lead to a spate of pseudo-scientific examinations of the effects of films on spectators, such as the twelve-part Payne Fund studies. Books such as Herbert Blumberg's *Movies and Conduct* (New York: Macmillan, 1933) focused on the moral consequences of cinema for modern society, and their existence attests to the anxiety that cinema had a transformative effect on spectators. Richard de Cordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 11.


13. While there is much evidence to support the claim that fan magazines were written for and read by women, it is worth noting that nods were occasionally made toward a male readership. According to "A Dream Come True," the June 1922 *Motion Picture* magazine article that announced that Bow had won the 1921 Fame and Fortune Contest, there were male participants: "We are sorry to say that the judges could not find a single male with the requisite qualifications for a winner" (94). Considering their long list of female prize winners, that there were male contestants and, implicitly, male readers is somewhat suspect.

14. Gaylyn Studlar, "The Perils of Pleasure? Fan Magazine Discourse as Women's Commodified Culture in the 1920s," in Richard Abel, ed., *Silent Film* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 292. *Motion Picture* magazine blatantly used this logic in an advertisement for itself in its March 1926 issue: "When you buy your movie ticket you'll be getting more for your money if you have read the newest issue of MOTION PICTURE MAGAZINE. . . . It increases your enjoyment of the movies by telling you the things you want to know about the players and directors most prominent at the moment" (90).

15. Studlar, "The Perils of Pleasure?" 293.

16. The ruthless perfection demanded of stars was nicely demonstrated in the July 8–October 5, 1999, "Fame after Photography" exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Curators included "before" and "after" studio photographs of stars, revealing the degree to which the imperfections in their faces were eradicated through careful touch-ups and postphotographic manipulation.


18. Richard Ohmann suggests that Sarah Grand first used the term in an 1894 issue of the *North American Review*. Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Verso, 1996). As Ohmann puts it, "A woman was unsettlingly new: if she disrupted old understandings of the feminine" (270). This was as much the case at the turn of the century, the subject of Ohmann's study, as it was during the 1920s.


22. Ibid., 160.

23. While such historical generalizations are always too reductive, Mary Ryan suggests that "the rate of female employment skyrocketed in the teens and increased at only a moderate rate, if at all, between 1920 and 1930 when over ten million women were at work outside the home" (508). Ryan, "The Projection of a New Womanhood: The Movie Moderns in the 1920s," in Jean E. Friedman and William G. Shade, eds., *Our American Sisters: Women in American Life and Thought* (Lexington, Mass.: Heath, 1982), 500–18. Stanley Cohen's study substantiates the essence of Ryan's claim: "Females barely held on to most of their earlier gains in the professions and in education during the 1920s; and in some cases, lost ground." Cohen, *Rebellion against Victorianism: The Impact for Cultural Change in 1920s America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 98.


27. Elinor Glyn's "It" was serialized in *Cosmopolitan*, February and March 1927. The story for and read by women, it is worth noting that nods were occasionally made toward a male readership. According to "A Dream Come True," the June 1922 *Motion Picture* magazine article that announced that Bow had won the 1921 Fame and Fortune Contest, there were male participants: "We are sorry to say that the judges could not find a single male with the requisite qualifications for a winner" (94). Considering their long list of female prize winners, that there were male contestants and, implicitly, male readers is somewhat suspect.

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Historians of American music have vigorously acclaimed the rising young composers of the 1920s. As the legend goes, that decade saw something special happen, and New York City was the central place where it occurred. Challenging a conservative and inhospitable music establishment, figures such as Aaron Copland, Henry Cowell, and Edgard Varèse struck out on their own to form performance societies and publishing enterprises that would promote the newest compositions. In a few short years New York was transformed from a remote outpost of modernism, a city whose concert life had been suffocated by "the grey musty presence" of the traditional European repertory (as the critic Paul Rosenfeld rued in 1920), into "the capital of the musical world," as contemporary commentators repeatedly boasted. 1 The composers at the center of these changes deliberately cultivated an image of autonomy and iconoclasm. While such a stance was basic to modernists throughout the Western world, it assumed particular contours in the United States, where the battle for recognition and respect was especially intense. Leaders among America's young composers, perhaps by necessity, became deft spin artists who shaped gritty images of self-sufficiency, often tapping into cherished American myths of the pioneer and the inventor. Henry Cowell, for example, described his colleagues from this period as "experimental," "uninhibited," and "untamed," characterizations that have been repeated over the years by subsequent historians. The British critic Wilfrid Mellers, in a survey of American music history, titles his chapter on composers since World War I, "The Pioneer and the Wilderness." 2

While notions of iconoclasm and aesthetic autonomy can account for some features of the modern-music movement in New York during the 1920s, they obscure the complexity of the community that brought it into being. Composers certainly dominated the foreground, but they did