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**A Star Is Born: Cinematic Reflections on Stardom and the "Stardom Film"**
**King's College London, 13 September 2013**

A Report by Shelagh M. Rowan-Legg, King's College London

In September 2013, the Film Studies Department at King's College London hosted a conference entitled "A Star Is Born: Cinematic Reflections on Stardom and the 'Stardom Film'". Hosted by doctoral students Olga Kourelou and Kulraj Phullar, the conference took the theme of stardom, or stars as characters, as its subject matter. It aimed to explore the diversity of stardom, especially in non-English language, art or avant-garde cinema. The papers presented explored expressions of stardom at different historical and/or national cinematic moments. The conference keynote speakers were Professor Rachel Dwyer and Professor Mandy Merck, supported by two sessions with two parallel panels respectively. The various topics considered included stardom films, systems of stardom, stars as image authors and the reinvention of the star image. It proved an insightful, interesting conference, with papers and perspectives on cinemas, and of course stars, that have not received great academic attention.

The first keynote speaker, Rachel Dwyer (School of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of London), spoke on the family dynasty of Indian cinema, the Kapoors. While Western cinema has seen acting dynasties such as the Barrymores and Richardson/Redgraves, the Kapoors are directors and producers as well as actors. There is a lineage of stardom, but also an achieved stardom; the family assists the various younger members through lifelong training. The generations have developed alongside Indian cinema: the older generation, the biggest star of which is Raj Kapoor, worked mainly in films addressing grand narratives and historical films; the next generation turned more to comedies and musicals. Raj Kapoor also became a director and producer when the old studio system was collapsing, and helped to define what Indian cinema would become in the years after independence. After retirement, his family (both children and cousins) took his place; Dwyer commented on the particular importance of the extended family in Hindi culture. While Rishi Kapoor might have begun under his father's shadow, he created his own image of the sensitive, romantic hero (and not always the main hero). In the early twenty-first century, Rishi began to play against type, starring variously as an older gay man, a villain and even as a boorish image of his own star persona, thereby inverting his own star image and playing against a text he created. Dwyer noted that there has never been a gap in the Kapoor dynasty and, while there is some hostility to nepotism in Western cultures, this does not exist in India. Dwyer said that the Kapoor family members are idealised and, while there is no official management of their star image, their glamour and seemingly happy extended family keeps them popular. Dwyer's address was a fascinating look not only at Indian cinema, but at how star systems differ from nation to nation.

The first panel I attended was entitled "Systems of Stardom". Adrian Garvey's (Queen Mary London) paper "*New York, New York*: Stardom, Intertextuality and Cinephilia" looked at Martin Scorsese's film and its examination of the star system. Garvey noted that, unlike the majority of Scorsese's work, *New York, New York* (1977) rejects realism. He examined how the film reworks and reimagines Hollywood's past. Minnelli is associated with her parents and with the studio system within which they worked. The naturalism of the acting contrasts with the era the film evokes. Garvey investigated how the film, in many ways, was the bridge between the old star system generated by the studios and the work of actors such as Robert De Niro and filmmakers such as Scorsese, which replaced it. The intertextuality is mediated through the characters and their own star status, as well as through the actors. Many of these themes were also examined by Gwénaëlle Le Gras (Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux 3), in "Michèle Morgan and Henri Vidal: A Mise-en-abyme of an Unusual Asymmetry of Type and Class." She looked at the French film stars and the interconnectedness of their professional and personal lives. Morgan had formal training and was considered one of France's greatest actresses; Vidal was from a modest background and had no formal acting training. Their first film was successful in part because of their real-life romance. However, Morgan was the focus of the marketing, while Vidal was often not even pictured on the posters. Le Gras investigated how their on-screen personas presented Morgan as in control, successful and strong and Vidal as little more than a pretty face. Even after they stopped working together, this continued, but it was in marked contrast to the portrayal of their offscreen, personal life, with Vidal as the alpha male, in control of a passive Morgan. Le Gras's paper looked at how this contrast made sure that they both continued to make films.

At the same session, two papers looked at portrayals of stardom within film. Phullar's paper "What Price Stardom Film?: Gender, Ordinariness and the Limits of Self-Criticism in *Bombshell*" looked at films that were somewhat critical of Hollywood. Phullar noted that films such as *Bombshell* (Victor Fleming, 1933) tried to be self-referential. Its star, Jean Harlow, plays a character who is plucked from obscurity and manipulated by Hollywood. However, Phullar also noted that the film never shows either the final product (films starring Harlow's character) or fan reactions, as though maintaining the mystery of the star persona it creates. The film was released at a time of turmoil in the studio system, so perhaps, Phullar suggested, it was attempting to show Hollywood in a positive light. At the time of its release during the Depression, the lives of studio executives and stars were seen as spoiled. Harlow's character is shown as working class and exploited by the system, but the film concentrates on her personal life, again, as Phullar noted, probably in order to maintain the mystery that Hollywood thought it needed for its audience. Frank Krutnik (University of Sussex) also looked at the portrayal of labour in Hollywood in his paper "'That's the Picture Business!': Labour and Stardom in *Stand-In*". Krutnik examined how the film took a more direct look at the politics of labour within the Depression era. He noted that the film isn't necessarily about stardom per se (as its main characters are extras), but engages with stardom as part of its larger investigation of Hollywood. Krutnik showed how the film emphasises labour, the work of the studio and the work of the stand-in, against the glamour of stardom and the Hollywood system. The film clearly supports the worker against the capitalist, attempting to show that film is just as much a business as any other and should protect its workers. Krutnik examined both contemporary reactions to the film and press coverage at the time of release, to show how different audiences perceive a film that is very much of its time.

The second panel I attended was "Stars as Authors of their Images". The first speaker, Leila Wimmer (London Metropolitan University), presented a paper entitled "*Jane B. par Agnès V.* (1987): The Stardom Film as an Imaginary Portrait". Wimmer considered how

changes in Jane Birkin's star image in France came through her work with Agnès Varda. Wimmer looked at early images of Birkin as a sex symbol, her much publicised affair with Serge Gainsbourg and the intense media scrutiny she endured. She focused on Birkin through the European stardom context and considered how her life has been in many ways a performance; her work with Varda, as Wimmer observed, helped shift her image from "sex kitten" to serious actress. Wimmer looked at the intertextual play between Birkin's projected image and her offscreen life in the biographical film. Varda mixed documentary segments with fiction, asking the spectator to consider how documentary advances fiction, and how a star's personal life furthers their on-screen life. Ian Murphy (University College Cork) looked at the on- and offscreen persona of Jennifer Jason Leigh in his paper "Bad Girl Rising: Ulu Grosbard's *Georgia* as a Perverse Stardom Film". Murphy noted that Leigh is known for playing demented, dark, frightening characters in films such as *Last Exit to Brooklyn* (Uli Edel, 1989) and *Single White Female* (Barbet Schroeder, 1992), though this is apparently in marked contrast to her own personality, as she has often called herself "the good girl". On-screen, she has cultivated a rebel image, placing her outside of Hollywood and society in general, in her pursuit of representing what Murphy called the abjected woman. Murphy called this type of performance a mode of expression that blurs reality through the lens of *Georgia* (1995), which examines music stardom. Like other roles of Leigh's, it is an acknowledgement of the cinematic apparatus and star system as social masks, a process that produces self-awareness. Murphy examined how Leigh's role in *Georgia* sees her bringing her preference for darker roles to the idea of stardom itself, as her character attempts to find the fame that eludes her through her own self-destructive behaviour. In the final paper in this panel, Jennifer O'Meara (Trinity College Dublin) took a more playful look at the star persona within and without film in her paper "Playing with Persona While Playing Oneself: Cate Blanchett and Tom Waits in *Coffee and Cigarettes*". In this film, both Blanchett and Waits are mocking the insecurity and ego associated with stardom. In Blanchett's case, she plays both herself and a fictional cousin, in an impersonation of an impersonation. O'Meara's research indicated that Blanchett filmed each character sequence separately; therefore, she was in control not only of herself as an actress, but of her portrayal of herself as an actress, mocking her own star persona. Director Jim Jarmusch has cast Waits in his films before, and Waits has played himself before, mocking the crossover of musicians to film and the insecurity of fame. O'Meara concentrated on the idea of performance as gesture, which is layered and complex when one is playing with the idea of stardom.

The second keynote address was presented by Mandy Merck in the afternoon. Merck (Royal Holloway, University of London) spoke on the two film versions of *Imitation of Life* (John M. Stahl, 1934; Douglas Sirk, 1959) and representations of celebrity and stardom. Specifically, she investigated the pathology of stardom, complexes of imitation and the paradox of self-assertion of authenticity through imitating others. In both films, a white woman and a black woman form a friendship, both presenting different representations of the image of white and black personas in American culture. Merck notes that celebrity is a recurring narrative in both films. In the 1934 version, the black woman, Delilah, becomes the celebrity face of a product, imitating the "authentic" image of the black woman: strong, stoic, passive and yet still inferior. For Merck, this portrayal does not come naturally to Delilah, but is part of the common representation of black women in film, reflecting society at the time. In the 1959 version, it is the white woman, Lora, who achieves celebrity; but as Merck pointed out, Lana Turner's portrayal of Lora becomes an imitation of herself as a celebrity, with Turner relying on the melodramatic artifice of the film's genre. In both films, the children of the two women find their subjectivity through imitation of the adults. In the 1959 film, Sarah Jane, who wants to pass as white, learns how to behave from Lora. Merck examined how

each film, whether overtly or covertly, asked what it means to be "white" or "black", through its representations of celebrity. Each film shows a "star" searching for authenticity. Merck explored how celebrity forms from public attention, and what kinds of representations the spectator seeks in film, both then and now, especially in representations of women and race.

Academic research on stardom often focuses on celebrity status and how stars affect the reception of films. As the various panels and closing discussion with the keynote speakers showed, there are more areas to be explored, particularly looking beyond Hollywood and into the various areas of national cinemas, audience reception and avant-garde cinema.

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