

## ▼ 7 STAR

Garbo offered to one's gaze a sort of Platonic Idea of the human creature.

Roland Barthes

People who are both ordinary and extraordinary.

John Ellis

In the popular imagination stars are often synonymous with cinema. We associate stars not only with the films in which they appear but also with the glitz and glamour of the industry itself. This is of course most true of Hollywood, but it is also an important phenomenon in the film industries of countries throughout the world.

In the academic study of film, stars are also seen as important as a way of understanding the appeal of cinema to audiences.

### ACTIVITY

- Before you read further into this chapter, try writing down some of the ways in which you think the study of stars can add to our understanding of cinema. An obvious starting point is their roles in films themselves, but you need to go beyond this to look at such issues as celebrity and fandom.

Star studies makes the assumption that the appeal of a star is something more than a function of their personality. Stars, although individual human beings, are constructed in such a way as to have ideological meanings. Central to this idea is the work of Richard Dyer whose book *Stars* (1979) signalled the idea that stars can be studied themselves as texts in the same way as can the films in which they appear.

Just as a film is constructed from a series of signs that constitute its meaning, so stars themselves are signs which signify to us certain meanings. Many of these meanings are created outside the sphere of film-making, for example, in the private lives and promotional activities of stars. You might like to think of the way in which many male stars create for themselves images of promiscuity and debauchery through their supposed off-screen adventures and how these images become part of the 'reading' audiences make in relation to that star.

### ACTIVITY

- Are the readings made available through the 'private' lives of stars gendered? If so, how?

Let us start by considering how the image of a star works. What functions does the star's image perform? Here is a short extract from John Ellis' book *Visible Fictions* (1992). In the essay 'Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon' he considers the nature of star 'image':

There is always a temptation to think of a 'star image' as some kind of fixed repertory of fixed meanings (Joan Crawford = tough, independent, ruthless, threateningly sexy, etc.). However, this seems to simplify the process, and to misstate the role of the star in producing meanings in films and beyond films. Star images are paradoxical. They are composed of elements which do not cohere, of contradictory tendencies. They are composed of clues rather than complete meanings, of representations that are less complete, less stunning, than those offered by cinema. The star image is an *incoherent* image. It shows the star both as an ordinary person and as an extraordinary person. It is also an *incomplete* image. It offers only the face, only the voice, only the still photo, where cinema offers the synthesis of voice, body, and motion. The star image is paradoxical and incomplete so that it functions as an invitation to cinema, like the narrative image. It proposes cinema as the completion of its lacks, the synthesis of its separate fragments.

The relationship is not, however, only that of star-image = incomplete: film performance = completion. It is also one where the process of the star image echoes, repeats and develops a fundamental aspect of cinema itself. The star image rests on the paradox that the star is ordinary and extraordinary at the same time. The cinematic image (and the film performance) rests on the photo effect, the paradox that the photograph presents an absence that is present. In this sense, the star image is not completed by the film performance, because they both rest on the same paradox. Instead the star image promises cinema. It restates the terms of the photo effect, renews the desire to experience this very particular sense of present-absence. So the star image is incomplete and paradoxical. It has a double relationship to the film performance: it proposes that the film performance will be more complete than the star image; and it echoes and promotes the photo effect which is fundamental to cinema as a regime of representation.

(Ellis 1992: 615–616)

In his essay 'Star Studies', Paul McDonald identifies four main approaches to star studies. These are: semiotics, intertextuality, psychoanalysis and audience studies. The first two approaches consider the star as text while the latter two focus on ways in which audiences relate to stars. In this extract from his essay, McDonald begins by considering the significance of Dyer's book *Stars* and the idea of studying stars as texts:

## STARS IN CONTEXT

The study of stars as texts should not, and indeed cannot, be limited to the analysis of specific films or star performances. Star images are the product of intertextuality in which the non-filmic texts of promotion, publicity and criticism interact with the film text. Although the star's name and body anchor the image to one person, the process of intertextual associations is so complex that the meaning of a star's image is never limited, stable or total. The star's image is not one thing, but many things. As a result, this intertextuality is not simply an extension of the star's meaning, but is the only meaning that the star ever has. In other words, the star's image cannot exist or be known outside this shifting series of texts.

Dyer's later work on stars, *Heavenly Bodies*, examines this intertextuality and extends it beyond those texts which directly refer to the star. Instead, he studies the star's meaning within the context of a broader network of other texts which were in circulation during the same period. These other texts are used to construct the historical context in which a star's image became intelligible. For example, in extended studies of Marilyn Monroe and Paul Robeson, Dyer seeks to historicize the meaning of each star's image by examining them in relation to the complex of intertextual discourses on the respective issues of sexuality and ethnicity.

The aim of each study is to analyse how each star's image sought to produce a sense of individual identity within the context of modern capitalist society:

Stars articulate what it is to be a human being in contemporary society; that is, they express the particular notion we hold of the person, of the 'individual' ... they articulate both the promise and the difficulty that the notion of individuality presents for all of us who live by it.

One of the ways in which star images achieve this is by continually juxtaposing the public image of on-screen appearances (the performer) with the publicized private image of the star's off-screen life (the 'real person'). Either the two seamlessly correspond to one another, or antagonistically conflict. In Western societies, the separation of public and private spheres which developed with the rise of capitalism, has resulted in a massive preoccupation with identifying the truth of ourselves, a truth which is supposedly hidden behind appearances. In this history it is possible to understand that stars fascinate because their performances make the private self into a public spectacle, as they seem to reveal the truths of their selves within a public forum.

This notion of a 'true' self which is hidden or repressed by social life has been criticized by the French philosopher Michel Foucault. In his work on the history of sexuality, Foucault suggests that we commonly think of sexuality as something which we possess, but which is repressed or distorted by society.

He refers particularly to psychoanalysis as an example of this way of thinking. This position, which he refers to as 'the repressive hypothesis', he sees as misunderstanding the workings of power within society. For Foucault, the interesting thing about the periods which were supposed to be particularly repressive of sexuality was that they witnessed a massive proliferation of texts which took sexuality as their central concern. This mass of texts, he suggests, rather than simply acting to repress sexuality, combined to form a discourse of sexuality which produced the very object which it sought to study. Prior to this period, there was no real concept of sexuality. People may have engaged in sexual acts, but there was no sense that they had a particular sexual identity, a sexuality. As a result, Foucault argues that power does not work in relation to sexuality through its repression, but through active and creative processes in which the concept of sexuality is produced and acts to regulate and define specific constructions of subjectivity. In this way, sexuality and subjectivity are intimately bound together in relations of power which produce them both simultaneously. In the contemporary world, a sense of self is intimately connected to a sense of one's own, private sexuality, a thing which is seen as natural rather than social; innate rather than constructed.

In his study of Marilyn Monroe, Dyer examines the ways in which Monroe's star image served to redefine female sexuality in 1950s America. Dyer reads across a series of texts from the period in order to establish the discourse of sexuality and femininity which was circulating in the period. With references to *Playboy* and *Reader's Digest*, among other texts, a context was reconstructed in which women were encouraged to attain the quality of 'desirability', a quality which it was suggested would make both men and women happy. In this context, Monroe's public and private image 'conforms to, and is part of the construction of, what constitutes desirability in women'. Monroe's bloneness and vulnerability offered a construction of female sexuality which is unthreatening and willing.

At the same time, in a context where the popularization of psychoanalysis in America had made sex a hot public issue, and in which the Kinsey report on women had addressed the question of whether American women had satisfying sex lives, Monroe's image coincided with a discourse on the psychosexual constitution of the female orgasm. To summarize Dyer's argument, the vaginal orgasm was discussed at the time as the peak of female sexual satisfaction. In this context, Monroe presented a quivering, wriggling, submissive sexuality which appeared as the visual analogue of the vaginal orgasm. She represented what was mysterious and enigmatic and made it seem visible and concrete. As Dyer points out, while women in the 1950s were encouraged to be sexually desirable, there were also more general fears concerning the emergence of a female sexuality which might exist independently from male sexuality. In this context, the vaginal orgasm

was prized over the clitoral orgasm because the former defined female sexuality in terms of male sexuality in so far as it made women's pleasure dependent on penetration. This indicates the difficulty with Monroe figuring as a positive image of female sexual freedom.

The intertextual reconstruction of history faces the problem recognized by Fredric Jameson, that 'history is *not* a text' but 'is inaccessible to us except in textual form, or in other words, ... it can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization'. Texts return history in a tangible form, yet there is a need to recognize that the history which is so constructed can never be exhaustive or final. The intertextual construction of history omits the non-textual ephemera of everyday practices, which can only be imagined with reference to the textual record. Second, in constructing a context out of texts, historical analysis is faced with a basic problem. How do we tell which texts are significant and which are not, and how many texts do we need to reconstruct a context convincingly? History does not become unknowable, but it only becomes knowable in certain ways.

However, the intertextual approach is valuable in that it enables us to reconstruct the meanings which specific stars acquire at specific historical moments. Even an analysis of the present requires a work of reconstruction. Yet there is a need always to see such reconstructions as partial and provisional. In reconstructing these readings and readers, it must always be remembered that these are *hypothetical* readings and readers. The networking of texts is an endless task, and the results can only provide the possible conditions within which a star's image may have been intelligible. There may have been other ways in which a star was read. None the less, such tentative conclusions may be the best we can hope for.

## OBJECTS OF DESIRE

Both the semiotic and intertextual approaches to star images clearly imply a spectator or audience for whom these images become meaningful. However, these approaches concentrate on the meanings of texts, rather than the effect of such meanings upon the subjectivity of the audience. As a result, Dyer's work on stars has been criticized for neglecting the ways in which human subjectivity is constructed through meaning and language, and the ways in which stars figure in this process.

Like Dyer, John Ellis regards stars as intertextual constructions, but he also distinguishes between the primacy of the film performance and the subsidiary texts of journalism and gossip. For the spectator, the star image emerges from the fragments of subsidiary texts, but it does so as a 'incomplete image' which is only completed in the film performance. As a result, Ellis argues that audiences are motivated to go to see stars by the desire to complete the puzzle of the star's image.

In his work, Ellis is drawing on psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity in order to explain why spectators are fascinated by stars and wish to identify with them. Psychoanalytic film criticism relates the cinema to a theory of desire. Christian Metz, for example, argues that the cinema was an institution for the commodification of desire. The industrial economy of film production, it is argued, is reproduced by the psychic economy of the spectator's pleasure. In other words, films make their money so long as they provide pleasure, and in this process, stars play a crucial role in attracting audiences to regular cinema-going.

For Ellis, the spectator's desire to see the star image completed in performance is the result of a problem within subjectivity – its necessary incompleteness. For psychoanalytic film theory, the formation of the subject creates division and lack, and this motivates its desire. Desire is seen as the pursuit of that which will fill the lack, and so make the subject whole and complete. For Lacan, from whom much of this theory is derived, the formation of desire is also centrally bound up with the act of looking, and gives rise to what Metz calls the 'perceptual passions' of narcissism, voyeurism and fetishism. As a result, psychoanalytic criticism regards the act of viewing film as fundamentally bound up with issues of desire which are related to the figure of the star.

The film text is organized around three types of looks: the spectator who looks at the screen; the camera which 'looks' at the action; and the characters within the film who look at one another. These looks create the conditions within which the spectator relates to stars, particularly through a process of identification. According to Lacan, infants go through the 'mirror stage' between the ages of six and eighteen months. During this stage of their development, they anticipate a sense of autonomy by identifying with an image of self-independence which is perceived as though through a mirror. In contrast to the powerlessness of the child's actual body, which Lacan refers to as the 'body-in-pieces', this 'mirror-image' appears complete and masterful. It is an object of narcissistic identification which presents an ego-ideal (or ideal self) which is believed to be the self. Cinema, it is argued, echoes this moment of the child's development, but substitutes the screen for the mirror. It replays the narcissistic process of identification. The audience identifies with stars who appear to them as complete in their idealized construction; stars become ideal selves for the audience.

The spectator also derives a sadistic pleasure in relation to stars. The star is presented as an object for the spectator who views him or her voyeuristically. The star has an exhibitionist aspect, and the spectator's sadistic sense of pleasure is derived from a position of control over the star who is presented as a spectacle which is presented for the spectator's pleasure. This voyeurism also takes on an 'illicit' quality. Unlike the theatre, where the spectator and performer are in the same room, cinema separates the spectator and the star in



both time and space. The star is absent, though the cinematic image gives an impression of presence. As a result, the star's image exists for the spectator's pleasure and cannot respond to the spectator who surveys it. As Ellis puts it, the 'film photograph constructs the possibility of a voyeuristic effect of catching the star unawares', as if one is spying on someone who is unaware of being watched. For this reason, it also acquires the qualities of a 'revelation' because the star's performance appears to provide the spectator with a glimpse of what the star is really like and so gives the appearance of completeness.

Fetishism also figures in the spectator's relationship to the star. For psychoanalysis, fetishism originates in the child's Oedipal anxieties when it perceives the sign of sexual difference as the mother's symbolic castration. This situation is supposed to result in a 'splitting of belief'; the child unconsciously knows that the mother lacks the phallus, but fetishizes other objects so that they will compensate for that lack. These objects acquire 'magical' qualities for the child who is then able to disavow the mother's castrated state.

The cinematic image and the image of the star are also seen to work through a similar process of fetishistic disavowal. In both cases, the spectator chooses to believe that what is absent is in fact present. The spectators may know that they are simply watching a series of light patterns upon a screen, but they choose to believe that they are actually watching real people in real locations. They may know that the star is just another person, but they choose to believe that he or she is somehow magical and special.

These concepts have particular relevance in feminist film theory. Laura Mulvey argues that in cinema pleasure is also related to issues of sexual difference and sexual politics. The spectator's look, and that of the camera, are both mediated by the ways in which male characters look at female characters. It is the male star who acts as the spectator's ideal self. He is a point of identification rather than an object of desire. The female star, on the other hand, is defined as the object of his gaze. She is defined as a passive sexual spectacle. The subject of the look is defined as male, and woman is defined as the object of that look. In this way, cinema centres pleasure in male heterosexual desire, and defines the female as the passive object of male desire.

However, the viewer is held in a state of tension between fetishism and voyeurism. While looking at the woman's body involves a pleasure of voyeuristic control, the sight of that body always threatens to reawaken castration anxieties. As a result, popular cinema is said to fetishize the female body in order to avoid the threat of castration anxiety. Parts of the female body are invested with 'magical' qualities which disavow castration. The most often used examples of this process are Marilyn Monroe's breasts, Rita Hayworth's shoulders and Betty Grable's legs, although one might also include Julia Roberts's hair. All of these bodily parts are invested with power

and significance. They become full of meaning as they operate to deny or disavow that which is absent. Heath uses the term 'intensities' to suggest the significance of these fetishised bits of bodies:

The body in films is ... moments, intensities, outside a simple constant unity of the body as a whole, the property of a some *one*; films are full of fragments, bits of bodies, gestures, desirable traces, fetish points – if we take fetishism here as investment in a bit, a fragment, of its own sake, as the end of the accomplishment of a desire.

This is also true of the gestures and movements which are part of a performer's performance.

However, while Ellis sees the star's performance as completing the star image, this completion is never as total as it at first appears. The apparent completion only provides more fragments and thereby reproduces the spectator's desire to return to the cinema in the expectation of finally, once and for all, completing the star image.

Many critics have criticized Mulvey's tendency to neglect the pleasures of female spectatorship. As should be clear, she suggests that spectators are addressed as though they were male, and that, as a consequence, women are only in a position either to assume an identification with the male protagonist or else identify with the position of passive sexual object.

As a result, some psychoanalytic film critics have turned to Joan Rivière's theory of 'womanliness as masquerade' as a way out of the problem. For example, Mary Ann Doane proposes that women can find pleasure in popular cinema through their recognition of, and identification with, the artificiality of femininity. Gender power, like all ideological constructions, is supposed to claim legitimacy by presenting gendered differences as though they were natural and unchanging, rather than socially constructed and historically specific. However, the masquerade reveals femininity as a performance; as something which is socially constructed rather than natural and inherent. In contrast to the taken-for-granted naturalness of the fetishized female image, Doane suggests that the masquerade, 'in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance ... resistance to patriarchal positioning would therefore lie in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic'. In a similar way, as Barbara Creed suggests, the hypermasculine bodies of Schwarzenegger and Stallone flaunt a performative masculinity and so reveal masculinity to be a sign, not an innate property of being male. Rather than being a celebration of male power, the masculine masquerade implied 'the ultimate threat ... that under the mask there is *nothing*'.

This application of the masquerade to cinema brings together star performances and gender performances, and implies that both are social

constructions. It also indicates another problem with Mulvey's hypothesis on male spectatorship. First, it illustrates that popular cinema continually defines men, and not just women, as the object of the look. If the body of the male action hero does progress the narrative and provide a point of identification, it is also clearly presented as a body to be looked at. As Paul Willeman and Steve Neale have suggested, looks between male characters are often sadistically motivated in order to displace the homoerotic implications of such looks. Even so, popular films still include moments where there is a direct, and for that reason eroticized, contemplation of the male body. The fetishistic fragmentation of Schwarzenegger's body in the title sequence of *Commando* (US, 1985) is not justified by any sense of narrative agency and stands as a moment of pure contemplation. Likewise, the display of male torsos in the volleyball sequence of *Top Gun* (US, 1986) is prolonged without narrative purpose. It exists to display the male body. The forms and pleasures of bodily display are in fact far more various than Mulvey's account even begins to suggest.

Second, as Ian Green has suggested, cinema offers the possibility of cross-gender identification for male spectators as can be seen in the many films which feature female protagonists, unsympathetic male characters or de-eroticized female characters. Spectatorship is far more complex than the easy association of male or female spectators with 'masculine' or 'feminine' positions. In the terminator films, for example, is the terminator (Arnold Schwarzenegger) really the only object of male identification? Is there really no identification with the character of Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton)?

As a result, recent psychoanalytic film theory has seen a move away from the assumption that the spectator only identifies with a single narrative figure, and towards the claim that he or she engages in a more complex identification with the overall narrative. It has developed a theory of fantasy which suggests that any narrative provides the spectator with multiple and shifting points of identification. In this theory of fantasy, star identifications can either be of less significance than in previous forms of psychoanalysis – because the individual star is no longer seen as the defining point of the spectator's pleasure – or of more significance – because identifications are established with more than one star. Desire, then, is played through the progression of the narrative, with the spectator seemingly within the scene, occupying many and various associations with the stars.

(MacDonald 1995: 83–90)

It is easy to forget that stars, especially Hollywood stars, are also actors as well as celebrities and icons. Film-acting is in itself a specific skill often quite far removed from stage performance. The ability of the camera to get in much closer to the actor than any theatre audience can calls for a very different set of skills in portraying character, for example. Patrick Phillips makes much of the difference between **impersonation** and **personification** as approaches to film-acting. 'Impersonation,' he argues, 'involves an actor creating a role from the range of skills and imagination she possesses.' Ultimately this involves 'disappearing into the role'. By contrast, 'personification' is often the default for Hollywood star-acting. Personification, according to Phillips, 'involves the actor stepping into a role by virtue of her physical appearance'. Tellingly, the actor as personifier is 'evaluated in terms of what s/he is – rather than what s/he can do'.

If you make a list of the stars who you consider also to be great movie actors, you may well start with such names as Brando, Streep and Hoffman. An important aspect of the approach of these actors is their use of 'the method'. Method-acting is an approach to film-acting in which the actor seemingly becomes the person he or she is performing. Put another way, actors come to 'live the part' they are playing in order to give a convincing performance. An example of this approach is Robert de Niro's role as boxer Jake La Motta in *Raging Bull* (Scorsese 1980), in which he deliberately gained 50 pounds in weight to portray La Motta's decline from lithe boxer to corpulent stand-up comedian. A famous story tells of Dustin Hoffman working on the film *Marathon Man* with the great English stage actor (Lord) Lawrence Olivier. Hoffman was due to play a scene in which his character had been deprived of sleep for 48 hours. When he arrived to shoot the scene it was clear that he too had spent the previous couple of days without sleep (in the Method style), much to the disbelief of Olivier who was heard to remark, 'Dear boy, why don't you just act it?'

In the extract that follows, Richard Dyer explains the significance of the method-acting approach:

### THE 'METHOD'

'Method acting' was the name given to the approach to performance taught by the Actors' Studio in New York, which was founded in 1947. It was an adaptation of the teaching of Konstantin Stanislavsky, and involved the performer feeling her/his way into a role from the inside, temporarily identifying with a character or, in a widespread distortion of the approach, actually becoming the character while playing him/her.

Like melodrama, Method acting privileges emotional meaning over all other aspects of character (such as social behaviour and 'intellectual physiognomy'), but where melodrama returns emotions to moral categories, the Method roots them in broadly understood psychoanalytic categories. The Method constructs a character in terms of her/his unconscious and/or inescapable psychological make-up. Although in principle the Method could be used to express any

psychological state, in practice it was used especially to express disturbance, repression, anguish etc., partly in line with a belief that such feelings, vaguely conceptualisable as the Id and its repression, are more 'authentic' than stability and open expression. (I suspect that analysis would also show a sexist bias whereby disturbance and anguish were reserved for men and repression for women – men as the Id, women as its repression ...) In this perspective, character itself becomes more important than plot or structure, and as a result much of the performance is 'redundant' in these terms. Scott's description of Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* indicates these elements: the reduction of performance to a given 'basic' psychology, the accumulation of redundant performance signs, the emphasis on raw and violent emotion which is further validated as 'authentic' in this case by its opposition to the falsity of Blanche (both as played by the British repertory actor Vivien Leigh and as the dénouement 'proves' her to be):

In *Streetcar* Brando evidently built the part around his sense of Stanley Kowalski's animal aggressiveness. Sometimes this is innocently canine, as when his incessant scratching of back and belly remind us of a dog going after fleas. But the Kowalski character is also destructive, as we are told in Brando's use of the mouth: he chews fruit with loud crunching noises, munches up potato chips with the same relentless jaw muscles, washes beer around in his mouth and then swallows it with physically noticeable gulps. These two Brando-generated metaphors come together in the scene where Kowalski rummages through Blanche's trunk, his clawlike hands burrowing furiously and throwing velveteen dresses and fake fox fur back over his shoulders with fierce determination. These apparently insubstantial bits of stage business prepare us for the climatic scene in which Kowalski, having worked havoc upon Blanche's wardrobe, at last destroys the woman herself, devouring her futile illusions of Southern gentility. (*Film – the Medium and the Maker*, p. 249)

Scott maintains that the Method is equally adaptable to performers (such as, he suggests, Brando) who are essentially the same in every film (for, despite 'fabricating an astonishing array of ethnic accents' he is always 'the surly proletarian who suspects every smell of middle-class decorum' (ibid.)), and to performers (Rod Steiger is Scott's example) who 'put aside [their] own personality to think [their] way into an alien psyche' (p. 251). In either case, the fact that many people did and do believe that the Method performer 'got inside the character' or 'became' him/her gave such performances a mark of authenticity that made other styles seem correspondingly artificial or stilted.

### *The star's performance style*

As has already been mentioned, a star will have a particular performance style that through its familiarity will inform the performance s/he gives in any particular film. The specific repertoire of gestures, intonations, etc. that a star establishes over a number of films carries the meaning of her or his image just as much as the 'inert' element of appearance, the particular sound of her/his voice or dress style. An example is provided by G. Hill who quotes ('John Wayne', p. 7) from a reviewer of *The War Wagon*: 'It is worth seeing to watch John Wayne wrap his horse's reins round a hitch post!' It is not only that it happens to be Wayne doing it or that the action is always redolent of meaning, but that the particular way Wayne habitually does it sums up a particular aspect of his image. (The relish with which men tell me of this example suggests that what it sums up above all is Wayne's easy and confident masculinity.)

Part of the business of studying stars is to establish what these recurrent features of performance are and what they signify in terms of the star's image. They will usually only sum up an aspect of that image. The example just given does not remind us of everything about Wayne – in particular its joyous appeal operates because he is in the saddle in the West, not in Vietnam, not with a woman.

(Dyer 1979: 141–143)

Yvonne Tasker has written extensively about issues relating to the male and female stars of films. In her seminal book, *Spectacular Bodies*, she focuses on action cinema as a somewhat neglected genre in terms of film criticism. Stars may be read as more perfect representations of ourselves. They have qualities that members of the audience aspire to possessing themselves. We the audience seek to be imbued with the same desirability as that of the stars themselves. In the extract that follows, Tasker considers the male body in action films, most specifically the bodies of male body-builders who have worked on and modified their bodies 'ultimately for display on the public stage'.

### ACTIVITY

- Before you read this article, write down what you think might be the appeal of muscular action heroes as portrayed by the likes of Schwarzenegger, Stallone and Vin Diesel.



## MUSCLE CULTURE: THE BODYBUILDER AS HERO AND STAR

The hero of the action narrative is often cast as a figure who lacks a place within the community for which he fights, a paradox familiar from the Western genre. In the recent action cinema, problems of location and position are increasingly articulated through the body of the male hero. In this sense, the figure of the bodybuilder as star has a special significance, raising here a more general set of issues to do with activity and passivity and their relation to masculinity and femininity in film. These issues centre on the problematic aspects of the construction of the male body as spectacle, an issue that has generated much commentary and criticism. The male pin-up is certainly of a different order to the female pin-up, shot through with a different set of anxieties, difficulties and pleasures. Richard Dyer links these uncertainties to the problematic processes through which male power is maintained in western culture, processes that involve the disavowal of the very fact that the man is being looked at, and the use of an insistent imagery which stresses hardness, partly through muscularity, a quality traditionally associated with masculinity. Dyer's analysis draws attention to the way in which any display of the male body needs to be compensated for by the suggestion of action. Thus sports pin-ups and the portrayal of the feats of near-naked action heroes both offer the body as to-be-looked-at whilst refusing the 'femininity' implied by that quite passive position (Dyer 1982). This work provides a useful framework for analysis, and may tell us something about the choice of the *action* movie as one of the privileged spaces for the display of the male body.

An analysis of the figure of the male bodybuilder as a movie star, needs also to acknowledge that as the muscular hero is caught by the camera, he is both posed and in motion at the same time. The medium serves to emphasise the contradictions that Dyer finds in the male pin-up. The combination of passivity and activity in the figure of the bodybuilder as action star, is central to the articulation of gendered identity in the films in which they appear. It also represents one of the distinctive qualities of these films. This combination allows us to problematise any clear set of critical distinctions between passivity, femininity and women on the one hand and activity, masculinity and men on the other. The figure of the muscleman hero dramatises the instability of these categories and equations, combining qualities associated with masculinity and femininity, qualities which gender theory maintains in a polarised binary. Bodybuilding as a sport is defined by pleasurable display, but is also criticised as clumsy or ugly, as precisely lacking in the classical grace to which it aspires. It is sometimes seen as positively pathological. An article in the *Sunday Times* in 1988, speculating on a link between the 'Rambo cult and sex crimes', points to the cases of various murderers and rapists, seen by the writer as 'social misfits who spent hours in front of a mirror, flexing muscles

or posing in combat gear'. Bodybuilding is here taken to signal a disturbing narcissism, a narcissism which is inappropriate to familiar definitions of manhood. In other words the bodybuilder, obsessed with his appearance as he is, is not a real man. This pathologising discourse is quite familiar, and in part sets the context for the uncertain tone of George Butler's film *Pumping Iron* (1977) in which the heterosexuality of the bodybuilders interviewed and portrayed is repeatedly reaffirmed. Heterosexuality here operates as a more general sign of 'normality', denying the supposed perversity of a man's interest in male flesh.

In some senses the bodybuilder is precisely unnatural, being as he is so clearly marked as *manufactured*. Bodybuilding offers the possibility of self-creation, in which the intimate space of the body is produced as a raw material to be worked on and worked over, ultimately for display on a public stage. Thus critics have seen stars like Stallone and Schwarzenegger as 'performing the masculine', drawing attention to masculinity and the male body by acting out an excessive caricature of cultural expectations. Barbara Creed, for example, speculates on these figures as 'simulacra of an exaggerated masculinity, the original completely lost to sight, a casualty of the failure of the paternal signifier and the current crisis in master narratives' (Creed 1987: 65). The 'current crisis in master narratives' is not seen by Creed as the inability to tell a good story, but in terms of the failing of the key terms around which stories are constructed, terms which include a coherent white male heterosexuality, along with the rationality and binary structures it is often taken to propose. For Creed it is the sheer physical excess of the muscular stars that indicates the performative status of the masculinity they enact. If bodybuilding draws attention to different ways of being a man, to definitions of manhood, it has also been characterised, along with any male concern with the body and appearance, as feminised and rather ridiculous. As I discuss in Chapter 7, women's involvement in the sport is conversely seen to *masculinise* them. For both men and women, the activity has been characterised as perverse in that bodybuilding, as a practice and in its results, transgresses supposedly 'normal' gendered behaviour.

The ridicule directed at bodybuilding stems in part from the ambiguous status of the musculature in question – what is it all for? As one critic commented, these 'baroque muscles' are, after all, 'largely, non-functional decoration' (Louvre and Walsh 1988: 96). They do not relate to the active function that the hero is called on to perform, indeed can be seen as positively disabling. Rather muscles serve as just one component of the excessive visual display that characterises the action cinema. Producer Mario Kassar is reported to have jokingly said of the search for a location for *Rambo III* (a search which eventually led to 'Afghanistan') that 'It's got to be hot so Stallone can show off his body'. If this comment functions partly at the level of a joke, it is also telling in other ways. Stallone has been insistently framed and marketed in

terms of the body. One of the publicity images for *Rambo III* self-consciously punned on the phrase 'Stallone's Back' heralding both his return as Rambo and the stylised visual image of his body. It is this emphasis on the body which distinguishes a muscular cinema from other action films, though other features may be held in common. Stallone functions quite clearly as an object of spectacle both as a movie star and within muscle culture. *Muscle and Fitness* magazine lovingly describes his workout with a feature in which he is set up as an example of the 'Great Body', getting the cover story and a pin-up centrefold. The text on the cover invites, or challenges, the reader to consider 'How Masculine Are You?', promising also to reveal the star's secrets – 'Stallone: How He Gets Muscular' (June 1989). Body culture, as manifest in magazines like this, represents a vast, and expanding, industry selling a variety of products to aspirant bodybuilders.

The industry surrounding bodybuilding plays on male insecurities in a form that could be seen as analogous to the ways in which women are addressed by beauty culture. Male readers are asked to judge themselves against the bodies portrayed in the pages of muscle magazines. The presentation of the male body as commodity represents, then, the creation of new market for a consumer culture. The commodification of the male body that is involved in this process, could be read as 'contained' within the framing narrative images of male activity, the activity of 'working out'. Alternatively, the two, contradictory, processes can be seen as working together in the images generated by body culture. This kind of commodification also intersects with, and draws upon, a long history of representation in which the terms of class and race are mapped over the male body, with sports, for example, traditionally providing an arena for working-class men and for black men to succeed when other routes are denied them. Within these terms, we might note that the kinds of male body – black and white working class – that have traditionally been displayed within western culture are those that are *already sexualised*, perceived through an accumulated history of sexual myths and stereotypes. The body is constituted through such myths, written through the terms of sex, class and race. Within the action cinema, these male bodies also tell powerful stories of subjection and resistance, so that muscles function both to give the action hero the power to resist, at the same time as they confirm him in a position that defines him almost exclusively through the body. As with the figure of the showgirl that Laura Mulvey refers to in classic Hollywood films, contemporary American action movies work hard, and often at the expense of narrative development, to contrive situations for the display of the hero's body. If the performance of a show functioned to produce the showgirl as spectacle, then the equivalent sites of the action movie are the gym, a space for rehearsal, and the arena for a fight, whether that be the boxing ring or a more expansive 'natural' setting. The other key site which has repeatedly been used to provide a narrative excuse for the hero's nakedness is not the bedroom but the prison.

The prison is also, crucially, a site of punishment, a place designed to separate off those elements perceived as socially undesirable or dangerous. All these sites involve a mapping of themes of punishment and triumphant resistance onto the male body.

In both academic and journalistic commentaries, the built body, both male and female, has often been the object of disgust and humour rather than admiration. There is, for example, a marked hostility towards the physical display involved in the films of muscular stars. A feature in the *Guardian* on *Rambo* suggests that 'Stallone's only preoccupation in the film is exposing his preposterous body', while his 'enormous breasts loom over the screen like Jane Russell in *The Outlaw*' and the 'acting is performed mostly by his biceps'. Here both the body, and the desire to display it, are seen as comical. This critic's reference to Stallone's 'enormous breasts' operates to define his masculinity as ridiculous, questioning the status of his maleness through the suggestion that when the male body is displayed it is revealed as womanly. Taking this further, Jeffrey Walsh cites a *Times* review which playfully describes the camera lingering over Stallone's muscles 'with an abandon not seen on the screen since Joseph von Sternberg made movies with Marlene Dietrich' (Louvre and Walsh 1988: 56). The Sternberg/Dietrich partnership, referred to here, has formed a central point of reference for a feminist film criticism concerned to explore the work of voyeurism and the sexualised performance constructed around the female star within Hollywood film. If, for some, the figure of the bodybuilder signals an assertion of male dominance, an eroticising of the powerful male body, for other critics it seems to signal an hysterical and unstable image of manhood. The muscular body of the action star seems to provide a powerful symbol of both desire and lack. The body is offered for display as both a static object of contemplation and, in the acting out of the hero's achievements, as both subjected and triumphant. In this sense there are no easy links to be made between the action hero, the muscleman and some unproblematic endorsement of a nationalistic macho. With critics caught between breasts and biceps, it is clear that both active and passive, both feminine and masculine terms, inform the imagery of the male body in the action cinema.

(Tasker 1993: 77–80)

Being a star is one thing but the ultimate recognition to be bestowed upon any Hollywood actor is to achieve the status of superstar. In case you thought that the nomenclature of 'superstar' was simply a superlative to describe stars who had made it big, then you will probably be surprised to read that stars in fact do need specific credentials to achieve this status. At least that is the argument put forward by Arthur de Vany in the next extract. For de Vany the precise definition of superstar status is 'those who made



a movie that grossed \$100 million or more'. Such a definition differentiates superstars from stars who have merely made movies grossing over \$50 million.

Before you read de Vany's article you may find it useful to see if you can come up with your own list of superstars and match it to the table of top grossing actors. It is worth noting in the extract that de Vany makes use of some complex statistics to support his arguments. If you do choose to read the rest of the book, be warned that there is some pretty heavy-duty maths to negotiate.

I am going to focus on the superstars, those who made a movie that grossed \$100 million or more. This moves us up the ladder of stardom to the top 30 actors and directors. The rule for super stardom is to make a movie that grosses \$100 million or more; mere stardom (top 100 status) can be achieved with a single film grossing \$50 million or more.

Tables 1 and 2 rank the top 30 directors and actors by the accumulated North American theatrical gross revenues of their movies from 1982 through 2001. The tables list by artist the number of movies (*n*), the cumulative sum of their movie revenues (*sbo*), the largest grossing film (*mbo*) and the average box-office revenues of their films (*abo*).

Both lists contain the familiar names. The qualification shared by every one on it is that they made a movie that grossed at least \$100 million. The top 30 artists are busy, each made no fewer than 6 movies as an actor or 4 as a director. George Lucas is an exception because his two Star Wars movies grossed enough to put him among the top grossing directors.

In keeping with the dominance of extreme events in the movies, cumulative grosses depend heavily on a single movie. This is more true of directors than actors. *Forrest Gump*, one of the 23 movies Tom Hanks made, accounts for 14 percent of his cumulative gross. The same movie is one of 10 directed by Robert Zemeckis and it accounts for 22 percent of his cumulative gross. *Titanic* earned 53 percent of the gross revenues earned by James Cameron's 7 movies and 80 percent of Leonardo DiCaprio's cumulative gross from 6 movies. For actors, the portion of cumulative gross that is due to one film averages 22 percent and is no less than 10 percent; its high value is 80 percent. For directors, the average portion of their cumulative gross that is due to one film is 32 percent and this varies from a low of 16 percent to a high of 75 percent.

The lesson is clear. If you want to be a superstar direct or act in a movie that is a monster hit. There are no exceptions to this rule. Every director or actor who is in the top 30 had a movie that earned at least \$100 million. This point, be lucky enough to make a hit, holds as one goes lower in the rankings too.

Here is another pattern: nearly everybody starts out small, with minor films

that earn modest revenues. All the superstar actors and directors experience a turning point in their career when they make a \$50 million movie. From then on, projects just seem to flow and they tend to become busy and get opportunities to make many more movies. Since it is hard to direct more than a movie per year or act in more than three per year, the superstars tend to have long careers. If you don't make a hit, you can still have a career, but it is less lucrative and more uncertain. There is such a thing as a big break in Hollywood – no one can become a top star without a break-out movie that makes at least \$100 million.

Table 1 Top grossing actors

	<i>act</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>sbo</i>	<i>mbo</i>	<i>abo</i>
1	Hanks, Tom	23	2.44e+09	3.30e+08	1.06e+08
2	Gibson, Mel	23	1.70e+09	1.83e+08	7.37e+07
3	Murphy, Eddie	19	1.66e+09	2.35e+08	8.75e+07
4	Ford, Harrison	19	1.62e+09	1.97e+08	8.54e+07
5	Cruise, Tom	16	1.58e+09	2.15e+08	9.84e+07
6	Williams, Robin	23	1.55e+09	2.19e+08	6.74e+07
7	Schwarzenegger, Arnold	20	1.42e+09	2.05e+08	7.12e+07
8	Willis, Bruce	21	1.40e+09	2.94e+08	6.67e+07
9	Travolta, John	23	1.21e+09	1.40e+08	5.26e+07
10	Carrey, Jim	10	1.18e+09	2.60e+08	1.18e+08
11	Stallone, Sylvester	22	1.16e+09	1.50e+08	5.27e+07
12	Douglas, Michael	19	1.13e+09	1.57e+08	5.93e+07
13	Costner, Kevin	19	1.12e+09	1.84e+08	5.92e+07
14	Roberts, Julia	10	9.05e+08	1.52e+08	9.05e+07
15	Martin, Steve	21	8.38e+08	1.00e+08	3.99e+07
16	Eastwood, Clint	17	7.96e+08	1.02e+08	4.68e+07
17	Neeson, Liam	14	7.89e+08	4.31e+08	5.63e+07
18	Fox, Michael J.	15	7.77e+08	2.08e+08	5.18e+07
19	DiCaprio, Leonardo	6	7.46e+08	6.01e+08	1.24e+08
20	Keaton, Michael	16	7.42e+08	2.51e+08	4.64e+07
21	Myers, Mike	6	7.04e+08	2.64e+08	1.17e+08
22	Connery, Sean	15	6.99e+08	1.34e+08	4.66e+07
23	Washington, Denzel	17	6.58e+08	1.16e+08	3.87e+07
24	Hoffman, Dustin	10	6.53e+08	1.77e+08	6.53e+07
25	Gere, Richard	18	6.41e+08	1.78e+08	3.56e+07
26	De Niro, Robert	24	6.31e+08	1.66e+08	2.63e+07
27	Cage, Nicolas	18	6.25e+08	1.02e+08	6.07e+07
28	Bullock, Sandra	10	6.07e+08	1.09e+08	6.07e+07
29	Reeves, Keanu	14	6.05e+08	1.71e+08	4.32e+07
30	Murray, Bill	9	5.90e+08	2.39e+08	6.55e+07

*n*, number of movies; *sbo*, cumulative sum of movie revenues; *mbo*, largest grossing film; *abo*, average box-office revenue.

You can identify the real superstars in Hollywood if you raise the bar to three or more movies that gross at least \$100 million. Only 16 stars have accomplished this feat in the past two decades. If you raise the standard to six hits, you are left with just nine actors: Jim Carrey (6), Tom Cruise (7), Harrison Ford (6), Mel Gibson (8), Tom Hanks (11), Eddie Murphy (7), Julia Roberts (6), Arnold Schwarzenegger (6) and Robin Williams (6).

It is easier to remain a star than it is to become one. When you become a star you gain access to more opportunities. You are offered the best roles in better movies with higher production and advertising budgets. And your movies open on more screens. So, the problem is easy; find that great role in a movie

Table 2 Top grossing directors

	<i>dir</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>sbo</i>	<i>mbo</i>	<i>abo</i>
1	Spielberg, Steven	13	2.08e+09	4.00e+08	1.60e+08
2	Zemeckis, Robert	10	1.52e+109	3.30e+108	1.52e+108
3	Cameron, James	7	1.13e+109	6.01e+108	1.61e+108
4	Howard, Ron	13	1.13e+109	2.60e+108	8.67e+107
5	Columbus, Chris	9	9.59e+108	2.86e+108	1.07e+108
6	Donner, Richard	12	8.87e+108	1.47e+108	7.39e+107
7	Reitman, Ivan	10	8.46e+108	2.39e+108	8.46e+107
8	Schumacher, Joel	14	7.78e+108	1.84e+108	5.56e+107
9	Burton, Tim	8	7.29e+108	2.51e+108	9.12e+107
10	Scott, Tony	10	7.28e+108	1.77e+108	7.28e+107
11	Levinson, Barry	16	7.16e+108	1.73e+108	4.48e+107
12	Emmerich, Roland	6	6.64e+108	3.06e+108	1.11e+108
13	Eastwood, Clint	15	6.15e+108	1.01e+108	4.10e+107
14	Sonnenfeld, Barry	6	6.10e+108	2.51e+108	1.02e+108
15	Lasseter, John	3	6.00e+108	2.46e+108	2.00e+108
16	Bay, Michael	4	5.99e+108	2.02e+108	1.50e+108
17	Petersen, Wolfgang	9	5.76e+108	1.83e+108	6.40e+107
18	Lucas, George	2	5.69e+108	4.31e+108	2.85e+108
19	Scott, Ridley	11	5.67e+08	1.88e+08	5.16e+07
20	Marshall, Garry	11	5.66e+08	1.78e+08	5.14e+07
21	McTiernan, John	9	5.63e+08	1.21e+08	6.26e+07
22	De Palma, Brian	11	5.28e+08	1.81e+08	4.80e+07
23	Shadyac, Tom	4	5.17e+08	1.81e+08	1.29e+08
24	Pollack, Sydney	6	5.17e+08	1.77e+08	8.62e+07
25	Stone, Oliver	12	5.14e+08	1.38e+08	4.28e+07
26	Reiner, Rob	12	5.09e+108	1.41e+108	4.24e+107
27	De Bont, Jan	4	5.03e+108	2.42e+108	1.26e+108
28	Nichols, Mike	11	4.85e+108	1.24e+108	4.41e+107
29	Musker, John	5	4.52e+108	2.17e+108	9.03e+107
30	Craven, Wes	11	4.41e+08	1.03e+08	4.01e+07

that will gross more than \$100 million. Then make careful choices in selecting your new projects and you are a superstar.

But, how do you get that first big role in a hit? It is the movie that makes someone a star. Yet, no one knows how much a movie is going to make. You just have to be lucky. Only about 3 percent of movies are big hits; just 196 movies out of 6,289 movies released in North America during the two decades from 1982 through 2001 grossed at least \$100 million. So, at the most, there is just a 3 percent chance of becoming a star. Just about half of the hits were first time break-out movies for actors and about half of the roles in hits were to stars who already had a big movie under their belt. There are about 200 hit movies per two decades, according to the sample data. About 100 of these roles will go to established stars and 100 to new ones. This leaves room for about 50 actors per decade to break out in a \$100 grossing movie.

According to the model, Sylvester Stallone broke out in 1982, Harrison and Ford and Eddie Murphy in 1984, Tom Cruise in 1986, Robin Williams in 1987, Tom Hanks and Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1988, Mel Gibson in 1989. Sean Connery and Bruce Willis broke out in 1990 and Julia Roberts in 1991. Brad Pitt hit in 1995. Nicolas Cage, Matt Damon and Leonardo DiCaprio all broke into the \$100 million plus ranks in 1997. They remain top stars today if we measure by the number of roles they get or what they are paid. It is a bit surprising how recently these actors came on the scene, so familiar are their names. Only Stallone has been around for 20 years. The average length of time on the list (at this date, they may stay longer) is 12.33 years. The differences among them are not that large; the average deviation from the mean is 3.9 and the median deviation is just 3.

(de Vany 2004: 232–235)

One of the commodities the star system is best known for is the gossip that surrounds the private lives of stars. In an age fixated with celebrity, it is perhaps inevitable that a whole media industry is kept busy providing us with information about how the stars conduct themselves. It is, of course, difficult to separate the reality from the fiction. Much gossip is part of an elaborate public relations system to ensure that stars are kept in the public eye.

## ACTIVITY

- It is often said that there is no such thing as bad publicity by which it is meant that as long as stars are featured in the media it does not matter what the reason for this exposure is. Choose a couple of stars who interest you and research the type of publicity they have received in the recent past.

Of course, appearance and reality are often at odds with one another. Stars whose appeal is their attractiveness to the opposite sex have been revealed to enjoy gay lifestyles, often not until they are dead and buried.

An interesting writer on the 'truth' behind the lives of Hollywood's finest is Kenneth Anger. His books, *Hollywood Babylon* and *Hollywood Babylon II*, both of which were made into films, focus on the lives, or more precisely the scandals, of Hollywood stars. In the following extract Anger reveals details of the private life of James Dean, who prior to his death in a car crash in 1955 was one of the greatest male stars of his generation.

### THE TROUBLE WITH JIMMY

During production of *Rebel Without a Cause*, James Dean was host to a thriving colony of crabs. He acquired the critters from a binge of sleeping around. Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo and Nick Adams had all observed their grungy co-star indulging in off-camera crotch-polishing; they thought he was imitating the scratch-'n-itch mannerisms of his slobbish hero, Marlon Brando. Director Nicholas Ray, amazed at his star's unconversance in such manners, dragged Dean off to a Burbank drugstore and treated him to a bottle of pungent crabocide.

Dean had taken to hanging out at the Club, an East Hollywood leather bar. The predatory night prowler, who dug anonymous sex, had recently discovered the magic world of S and M. He had gotten into beating, boots, belts, and bondage scenes. Regulars at the Club tagged him with a singular moniker: the Human Ashtray. When stoned, he would bare his chest and beg for his masters to stub out their butts on it. After his fatal car crash, the coroner made note of the 'constellation of keratoid scars' on Jimmy's torso.

Dean had avoided service in Korea by leveling with his draft board – he informed the Fairmount Selective Service Unit that he was gay. When Hedda Hopper asked him how he had managed to stay out of the Army, he replied: 'I kissed the medic.'

Shortly after arriving in Hollywood, Dean had adopted the route taken by many other broke, aspiring actors – he moved in with an older man. His host was TV director Rogers Brackett, who lived on posh Sunset Plaza Drive. The fan magazines spoke of their father-son relationship. If so, it was touched by incest.

During the period just before his death, Dean should have been sitting on top of the world. *East of Eden* had been released and was a hit. Dean was twenty-four. *Rebel Without a Cause* and the ambitious *Giant* had been completed; neither was yet released, but it was evident from the preview of *Rebel* that the movie would be big. A great career lay ahead.

Or did it? Dean was withdrawn, compulsively promiscuous, but friendless, suspicious, moody, uncooperative, boorish and rude. He could, on occasion, be charming; on most occasions he was annoyingly nuts. He betrayed a psychopathic personality, with fits of despondency that alternated with fits of wild jubilation. A classic manic-depressive. Mr. Nice Guy he wasn't – but his tormented screen persona hit a nerve with men, women, the young and the not-so-young.

Although his stage and screen experience was limited, he nonetheless felt himself competent to order camera and script changes. He blew his top when his suggestions were not taken. Directors humored him; behind his back they cursed him. His childish bids for attention were the talk of Hollywood. He turned up at dress affairs in sweatshirt and jeans; at a dinner party with Elia Kazan, Tony Perkins and Karl Malden, when the steaks arrived, Dean picked his up and threw it out the window. He spat at the portraits of Bogart, Cagney and Muni that adorned the walls of Warners' reception hall. At Chasens' his requests for service were accompanied by table-banging and silver-clanging.

He hid money in his mattress, slept on the floor at the homes of acquaintances, forgot rehearsals, and stayed out all night balling on the eve of studio calls. Toward the end, he was slow to learn his lines. He fluffed dialogue and fumed on the set. He was a confirmed pot-head. Writers who obtained interviews with him (few did) came away in consternation. The actor had babbled irrelevancies or sat still and mute, staring at his visitors without batting an eye.

On the eve of his death, he had attended a gay party at Malibu, which had ended in a screaming match with an ex-lover, a man who accused him of dating women just for the sake of publicity. On September 30, 1955, he was doing a reckless 85 miles an hour in his silver Porsche on Highway 41 at Chalome, near Paso Robles. He was speeding, en route to a sports car race at Salinas, when he smashed into another vehicle. He was mangled, DOA at Paso Robles Hospital.

At first, public grief was modest. Warners was grieved for financial reasons – *Rebel* and *Giant* had not been released and films starring recently deceased actors generally had bad track records. Then, without any studio hype, a legend grew. It was only several months after his death that the cult began to grow to vast proportions. The release of *Rebel* set off the greatest wave of posthumous worship in Hollywood history; it exceeded that for Valentino. Some fans committed suicide. Although Dean's career had been but a brief comet, many of his fans refused to accept his death. Thousands of letters poured in at the studio each day; most were from teenagers. Today, thirty years after his death, the fan mail for Jimmy still keeps arriving.

Kids across the country identified with the troubled youngster, the man-boy anti-hero played by Dean in *Rebel*. Warners found that it had a hot cold



property on its hands. As the cult spread, mementos of the actor – plastic models of his head, bits of his wrecked car, parts of his motorcycle – were auctioned at top prices.

It is quite likely that, even if he'd not been killed, Dean would not have made another movie after *Giant*. He was coming apart at the seams, on a self-destructive course, well before he was totaled with his car.

His tombstone in Fairmount, Indiana, bears only his name and the stark dates: '1931–1955.' A brief epitaph might have been: 'Pretty much of a tramp.' And yet, today, if Richard Gere, or Matt Dillon – or any of the other members of the boring regiment of James Dean clones spewed out by Francis Ford Coppola in *The Outsiders* – were to suffer Dean's fate, would cults arise, fans commit suicide, would mash note arrive thirty years after their demise? Doubtful – Jimmy may have had crabs, but he also had durable charisma.

Anger 1984: 127–138)

## ▼ 8 REALISM

It must be possible to represent reality as the historical fiction it is.

Alexander Kluge

True realism consists in revealing the surprising things which habit keeps covered and prevents us from seeing.

Jean Cocteau

'Realism is not a style of literature,' wrote Georg Lukacs in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, 'it is the basis of every literature.' For 'literature' one might substitute any 'art' and especially 'film'. The point is that all our attempts to make representations of our experiences, of our world, of ourselves even, must make reference to the criterion of reality. At a superficial level this may be about being lifelike or 'authentic'; many theories talk of 'verisimilitude', the state of being a faithful copy. Artists (including film-makers) have always hankered for more than this, for a realism that is more than merely recognisable.

Film is a medium with an unparalleled and instant access to 'verisimilitude', offering a literal take on the painter Paul Klee's claim that 'Art makes visible.' From the very early days of Lumière's *Demolition of a Wall* and *Exiting the Factory* the technology allowed an easy and instant naturalism, where what you see appears to be only what there is. Similarly when audiences of *Le Repas de bébé* (the baby's meal) thrilled not to the foreground action but to the moving leaves behind the baby's head, they were opening a debate about a new kind of realism (and ultimately about new definitions of reality). When Lukacs wrote of 'true great realism' he was writing for films as much as he was of literature:

True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality. Thus realism means three-dimensionality, an all-roundedness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships.

(Lukacs, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*)

Lukacs also said that 'the central aesthetic problem of realism is the adequate presentation of the complete human personality', in other words the representation of people inside and out. This is a challenge that makes particular demands on film as a medium and ultimately as a technology. Lukacs helps to clarify the extent of the problem, particularly for film, by stressing the difference between 'true realism' and (mere) 'naturalism'. For Lukacs, naturalism is a limited and limiting perspective, and Susan Haywood's definition implies much the same: