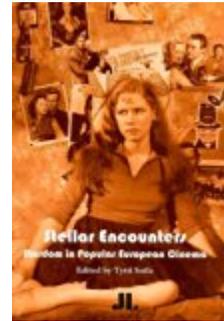


Tytti Soila. *Stellar Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema*. New Barnet: John Libbey Pub., 2009. viii + 294 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-86196-679-0.

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Cinema Stars in Europe

Stellar Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema participates in the rethinking of European cinema. Its notion of popular European cinema signals a fundamental revision of the assumed binary of studio-produced, market-driven films from Hollywood vis-à-vis national art-house cinemas from Europe. Organized in five sections, “Interrogating Hollywood Stardom,” “Cases of Stardom,” “Cultural Currency, Reception and Production,” “National Identity, National Appeal,” and “Politics, Performances and Personas,” the volume’s contributions are well written, thoroughly researched, provocative, and innovative. Anchored in star studies, the twenty-two articles engage with and expand the scope of seminal texts, such as Richard Dyer’s *Stars* (1979) and Ginette Vincendeau’s *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (2000). As a whole the volume impresses with the essays’ consistently high quality based on archival research and sophisticated theoretical engagement.

Stellar Encounters develops a model of stars that differs from Hollywood. Gunnar Iversen introduces the term “minor stars” who “were created in contrast to Hollywood stars, not as imitations” (p. 79). Only one, Olof Hedling’s provocative last essay of the volume, discusses contemporary stars in a possible pan-European frame, prescribing a model for transnational stars in the context of the economic restructuring of the European film industry. Complementary to national and pan-European contexts, two essays interrogate the movement of stars between different nations. Elisabetta Girelli reads the import of Italian stars to Britain in light of assumptions

about the national nature of stardom, excess, and glamour, while Giuliana Muscio’s essay about Isa Miranda analyzes the migration and remigration of the star between Italy and Hollywood, and between different star and political systems. Essays discuss film and television in nations or regions without strong film industries that traditionally fall through the cracks of European film studies. Alexander Dhoest’s essay on Flemish actors, Paul Lesch’s discussion of Luxembourg star René Deltgen, and Alexandra Schneider and Vinzenz Heidiger’s analysis of Swiss comedic stars contextualize stars in the complex self-understanding of the nation and/or region.

In addition to addressing different national and transnational contexts, the volume incorporates a range of theoretical approaches, from cultural studies methods of reception studies to queer and feminist theory. The essays by Robert Shail, Andrew Spencer, and Gill Plain address homosexuality and homosociality surrounding different male stars in Great Britain, illustrating how stars are deeply entrenched in sexual politics, in these three cases refracted through class. Harri Kalha’s intriguing contribution on 1930s Finnish star Theodor Tugai negotiates gender, sexuality, and modernity to offer an original and convincing rewriting of Laura Mulvey’s paradigmatic model of the female object and the male gaze.

While the latter essays pair male stars with repressed homosexuality, others connect female stars with the fascination and threat of modernity, particularly in 1930s Finland and Great Britain. Anu Koivunen nicely weaves

together different historical and theoretical strands in her discussion of mobility and modernity to propose that Tauno Palo –a “sexually ambiguous male star” imbued with “soulfulness and lyricism”–created “male trouble,” invoking and rewriting Judith Butler’s famous 1990 title *Gender Trouble* (p. 156). Annette Kuhn in her essay on modernity and femininity employs a case study of Jessie Matthews to show how the “implication of inauthenticity” linked cinema and femininity (p. 192).

The strength of many essays results from detailed archival research in newspapers, trade papers, personal letters, film and television shows, and interviews. For example, Maaret Koskinen’s fascinating essay on the Ingmar Bergman illustrates how he functions in the popular press of his native Sweden as an “erotic icon” in contrast to his role as *auteur par excellence* in an international context (p. 86). Koskinen thus shows that Bergman incorporates both *auteur* as well as star, traditionally considered mutually exclusive. The star Bergman only becomes visible in a national frame, while the *auteur* Bergman dominates the transnational image.

Several contributions contrast or connect traditional stars to new models of celebrity associated with television. While some authors refer to the historical change brought on by television’s reality shows that create celebrities instead of stars, other highlight the fluidity between the two media as part of national star systems. For example, Leif Ove Larsen interrogates the career of Norwegian comedian Rolv Wesenlund for a reading of changing sociopolitical contexts from the mid-1960s to the twenty-first century following the comedian’s trajectory from avant garde comedy in the 1960s to contemporary “anti-political tendencies” (p. 54). Similarly, the articles by Maddalena Spazzini on the Italian star Sabrina Ferrilli and Sonja de Leeuw about stardom in the Netherlands emphasize the importance of television for contemporary stars and vice-versa.

Stellar Encounters includes a preface by Ginette Vincendeau, which situates the book in the larger context of star studies, and a substantive introduction by Tytti Soila, which provides a theoretical road map. The latter highlights the absence of a coherent star system in Europe and emphasizes the notion of “vernacular stardom” (p. 2). Soila successfully maneuvers the theoretical implications of the essays and captures the multiplicity of methodological approaches. Yet, as with many other collections, the repetition of certain themes and gaps in others produce lingering questions that the volume does not answer. Particular themes, such as modernity, homosex-

uality, costume, and beauty, reappear across chapters but are neither related to each other, nor investigated in their privileged relationship to stars. As an effect of certain thematic clusters and methodological preferences, a few individual essays appear less integrated into the larger trajectory of the volume. For example, Susan Hayward’s very smart close reading of the costumes of Simone Signoret in *Casque d’Or* stands out methodologically.

As with many collections that emerge out of a conference, *Stellar Encounters* does not claim comprehensiveness. Several essays address Italian stars, including Marcia Landy’s contribution, which tracks their historical development in twentieth-century Italy. Strikingly many essays address smaller nations, such as Luxembourg, or countries with minor film industries, such as Switzerland, Norway, Finland, or the region Flanders. Yet, the gap regarding a discussion of stars from Spain, Germany, Portugal, and Austria, for example, or countries from the former East Bloc, such as Poland, Czech, and Hungary, create unexplained lacunae. The latter, for example leaves intact the assumed link between capitalism and the star system, a presumption that has recently has undergone revision with accounts of socialist and communist stars. The emphasis and diversity of northern European countries leads to repetition and overlap, but also isolates individual essays. Lydia Papadimitriou’s essay on stars of the 1960s Greek musical argues against a tendency to cast them as “cinema of directors” (p. 206). Papadimitriou offers a convincing argument about the dual roles played by Rena Vlahopoulou, combining “ordinariness and extraordinariness” (p. 210). As the only contribution about Greece and about the musical, the essay appears more in dialogue with an absent field of Greek film studies than with the other contributions, of no fault of its own.

A reader might also assume that the geopolitical emphasis of the volume on Finland, Great Britain, and Italy results from the interests of the scholars who attended the conference. But some reflection and interpretation on clusters and absences would have made the volume stronger: Is the fact that there are three essays each on stars in Britain and Italy, yet none on Germany and Spain, and neither on any country from the former East Bloc, a reflection of the importance of the star system itself in different national and politico-ideological contexts, or a reflection of the presence of film studies in those countries? Or does the predominance of certain countries and absence of others mirror the orientation of film studies toward or away from popular cinema in different national academic formations of film studies?

As with national contexts privileged in this volume, particular historical periods reemerge repeatedly throughout the collection, emphasizing earlier moments of film history. Early cinema, for example, witnessed the emergence of the star system. Jan Olsson's well-researched essay on Asta Nielsen's creation of a public debate around her censored film *In dem grossen Augenblick*, banned in 1911, illustrates this historical development. Similarly, the 1920s and 1930s repeatedly appear as historical focal point, such as in Kimmo Laine's piece on the period in Finland. However, one wonders whether certain periods (early twentieth century, 1920-30, post-war, 1950-60) mark crucial developments in the star system.

These larger questions are difficult to address for in-

dividual scholars in the limited length of the essay, but were they part of the discussion at the "highly productive conference that took place in Stockholm in July 2003" (p. vii)? Did Italian cinema produce more stars that emigrated to England and Hollywood than it imported to Italy? Does this reflect a social condition of Italy as emigration country or an ideological construct of its exotic appeal within Europe? How do we interpret the repeated references to homosexuality in regard to male stars in England and Finland? Are innuendoes of (male) homosexuality a necessary byproduct of the feminization of modernity emphasized in other essays? *Stellar Encounters* evokes as many questions as it answers, which makes it an important and thought-provoking contribution to the ongoing discussion in cinema studies, star studies, cultural studies, and European film studies.

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