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"I am not a Myth": Marlene Dietrich on Screen and in the Archive

This volume on Dietrich grew out of the "Marlene at 100" conference at Dartmouth in 2001, and the essays preserve something of the celebratory and conversational tone the event. This tenor fits both with the methodological concerns of the volume and with Dietrich's status as a signpost for film theory. In their adept introduction, Gerd Gemünden and Mary R. Desjardines describe Dietrich as a figure that at once embodies and exceeds any specific framing of Hollywood cinema, gender, or nation, to name some of the categories that her "masquerades and transformations" (p. 4) cut across. Indeed, for the editors, Dietrich's persona is very much a moving target, characterized by nothing so much as its "mobility among high and low cultures; among heterosexual, bisexual, and homosexual identities; among masculine and feminine gender identities; among American and European cultures" (p. 4). The introduction attempts to place Dietrich in terms of nationality and film theory, but the volume's contributions cast an even wider net, raising issues of gender, genre, technology, aging, politics, and biography.

The question of Dietrich's relationship to her German origin is but one aspect of her mobility. Dietrich left Germany for Hollywood in 1930. A committed antifascist, Dietrich became a U.S. citizen in 1939 and returned to Germany in an American uniform in 1945, playing shows for U.S. occupation troops. Like many exiles, Dietrich was not welcomed in the Federal Republic (FRG, or West Germany) and was picketed during her 1960 performances in West Berlin. Although Dietrich was buried in Berlin Schöneberg in 1992, it was not until 2002 that the city made her an honorary citizen. In recent years, Dietrich has become an icon of the new German capital, and her ubiquitous image presiding over Potsdamer Platz provides a counterweight to the Prussian theme park being erected on the ruins of the defunct GDR's old Palace of the Republic. As the editors put it, Dietrich's relationship to Germany is shaped by an unstable narrative of departure and failed homecomings. If Dietrich is a "litmus test for how Germans deal with their history" (Werner Sudendorf, quoted p. 18), she is no less a limit case for film theory. Famously characterized by Siegfried Kracauer as a "petty bourgeois Berlin tart" (quoted, p. 133), whose appeal derived from her impassivity and sadism, Dietrich is also invoked in Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" as the privileged object of the scopophilia mobilized (along with voyeurism) by a patriarchal cinematic apparatus to contain and discipline the female image.[1] As the editors write, more recent discussions of Dietrich, for example in the work of Gaylyn Studlar, "suggest a movement away from understanding her star persona as an inert, passive image entirely constituted by a collective phallocentrism, toward an understanding of the Dietrich star persona as performed, contributing to the enunciation of the film's multiple meanings and multiple positions available for spectators" (p. 11).

This volume is consistent in framing of Dietrich as the author of her own persona rather than as an object of the industrialized regime of gaze and gender that Mulvey was interested in critiquing thirty-five years ago. The destruction of pleasure is apparently no longer our project. And yet, to evoke Karl Marx, Dietrich may have authored her own star text, but perhaps not as she pleased or under conditions of her own choosing. During the 1930s, Dietrich's self-fashioning practices emerged against the direction of Joseph von Sternberg, who famously claimed to have not only discovered, but to have created Dietrich "in the crucible of his conception" (p. 103). At the same time, Dietrich's early film career was largely shaped by the overwhelming presence of Greta Garbo on the international film market. In order to position herself from Berlin as a candidate for Hollywood stardom in the first place, Joseph Garncarz argues in "Playing Garbo," Di-

etrich had to brand herself in Garbo's image, walking a razor's edge of imitation and differentiation vis-à-vis her model and competitor. In the context of this branding project, the von Sternberg myth gave Dietrich a certain amount of cover by allowing her to cast herself as a kind of celluloid Eliza Doolittle, providing American audiences with a version of the beloved rag-to-riches story, behind which she continued to refine her persona.

The first section of the volume, entitled "The Icon," disaggregates the complexity of Marlene Dietrich as star text into some of its more notable elements: face, legs, voice. In "Dietrich's Face," Lutz Koepnick cites a 1934 *Film Pictorial* article entitled "Composite Beauty–The Hollywood Standard," which, for Koepnick, "surreptitiously spoke the truth about the reifying logic of Fordist consumer culture. Instead of circulating star images as signs of authenticity and wholeness, *Film Pictorial* endorsed visions of the human body as marked by atomization and aggregation, by syncretism and montage" (p. 44). Although Dietrich's face didn't make *Film Pictorial*'s list (her legs did), it nevertheless epitomizes for Koepnick this reifying aesthetic, and he gives us a detailed account of Dietrich's expertise in the use of light and shadow to shape her own face, expanding upon techniques learned from Sternberg. Playing off of Roland Barthes' classic account of the face of Garbo as a fantasmatic screen, Koepnick argues that if the star of the silent screen's face represented the fleeting timelessness of the modernist artwork, Dietrich's face, in its refusal of authenticity and play of surface, was already closer to the digital morphs of contemporary cinema. Dietrich's face "was prosthetic, seamlessly incorporating technology into a new kind of postmodern organism" (p. 58). The "symbiotic relationships" (p. 46) between the corporeal and the technological that inform Koepnick's account of Dietrich's face serve as a leitmotif for this section, if not for the volume. Indeed, Amy Lawrence makes a similar argument, albeit addressing a different attribute, in "The Voice as Mask." Like Koepnick, Lawrence notes Dietrich's foregrounding of performance, which included her rejection of emotional immediacy to performing. Dietrich's voice is equally a fetish and vehicle of border crossings: like the dress of mirrors she wore for her 1953 Las Vegas stage shows, Dietrich's voice masked an aging body with the sheen of sameness and paradoxically familiar foreignness. In her essay on Dietrich's legs, Nora M. Alter makes another connection between the body and technology. Thus, Alter argues, the uncanny appeal of Dietrich's legs to German viewers of her 1930 breakout film *Der blaue Engel* (The Blue Angel, dir. Josef von Sternberg) demands to be read in the context of the unprecedented mutilation of bodies in the First World War, their "obscene presence" implying the threatening intactness of the female body in a context of the symbolic castration and real amputation of defeated male soldier bodies (p. 60).

The volume's second session, "Establishing the Star Persona," provides us with historical and theoretical case studies of Dietrich's rise to stardom and her efforts to maintain her persona over the years. The key film for this section is thus *Der blaue Engel*, which made Dietrich's reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. Elisabeth Bronfen's contribution reads this film as meditation on stardom and exile that both prefigures and facilitates Dietrich's own departure from Germany to Hollywood. Sternberg's film is a sustained meditation on performance and power, as the stiff schoolmaster is enthralled and humiliated by the bawdy nightclub singer. *Der blaue Engel* stages a double dislocation in Bronfen's account, as the reversal portrayed in the film's diegesis parallels the reversal of sadistic-voyeuristic and vicarious-masochistic positions of the gaze. Dietrich is looked at, but she also looks. This mode of cultural agency, "oscillating between voyeurism and exhibitionism" (p. 138) was incessantly foregrounded in Dietrich's performances, which always sat uneasily with classical Hollywood's ideologies of authenticity. *Der blaue Engel* is a good case study for the problem of authenticity in another sense as well, since it was filmed in two versions, English and German, more or less simultaneously, a "two originals, no copy" (p. 148) production, as Patrice Petro informs us in her essay on the film. This piece and the following articles by Mary Beth Haralovich and Erica Carter detail Dietrich's initial reception in both Germany and the United States and attend to the affinities and contradictions between the developing star systems in these two markets.

Carter demonstrated how the National Socialist press castigated Dietrich for her "un-German" cosmopolitanism, sexual ambiguity, and proclivity for masquerade, but did not cease to drop hints about her possible return, sculpting an incessant meta-narrative of the return of the prodigal daughter to the nurturing bosom of the German nation. Dietrich, of course, stubbornly refused any compromise with the Nazi culture industry. As late as 1991, she responded to a request to meet with Leni Riefenstahl to clear the air after sixty years by writing the word "Nazi" on the letter (p. 24, n. 8). Indeed, it was not until Joseph Vilsmaier's 2000 flop *Marlene* that German audiences would be presented with an answer (although perhaps not a satisfying one) to the dilemma that had also bedeviled Goebbels' Ministry of Propaganda: "how … to make over the transgressive international star of history into the affirmative national symbol of reconciliation that

she had never been" (p. 336)? Eric Rentschler's article "An Icon Between the Fronts" shows how, attempting to recuperate Dietrich as an icon of the German nation, Vilsmaier's film not only falsifies history by giving his Dietrich a stalwart Prussian *Bildungsbürger* love interest, but also unwittingly replicates the very discursive terms through which Dietrich's reception had been framed in National Socialist Germany, including the opposition between "Jewish" aesthetics of illusion and masquerade (von Sternberg) and "German" authenticity and substance (the fictitious Prussian lover). In bringing Marlene home, as it were, Vilsmaier's film censors both Dietrich's antifascism and her rejection by the postwar FRG, not to mention tamping down her sexuality. Rather than Dietrich the cyborg, to recall Lutz Koepnick's reading of the icon's face, Vilsmaier gives us Dietrich as "a pieta and national allegory" (p. 340) as she contritely ministers to wounded Wehrmacht soldiers.

Hollywood was soon equally ill at ease with Dietrich's star persona. Thus, for example, Patrice Petro points out that the American version of *The Blue Angel* is not only lacking in inner thighs–which is to say that it is less sexually explicit than the German version–but it also edits out the black audience members who can be seen at Lola Lola's performances. Haralovich gives a comprehensive account of how Dietrich's *Blonde Venus* was publicized in a variety of U.S. markets. The diversity of Dietrich's star text allowed for a wide variety of marketing strategies, which emphasized Dietrich by turns as vamp, suffering mother, or glamorous screen icon. Gaylyn Studlar, whose work on Dietrich's cultural agency and the subjectivity of the female star in general informs many of the volume's contributions, provides a fascinating study of this problem in "Marlene Dietrich and the Erotics of Code-Bound Hollywood." Paramount had signed Dietrich in 1930 on the basis of her "European sex appeal" (p. 213) in the same year as the Hayes Code went into effect. The studio thus found itself in the familiar dilemma of marketing eroticism within the confines set by American moral conservatism. For a brief moment in the early 1930s, Dietrich became a master at this tightrope act, paying lip service to the codes of bourgeois sexual propriety even while subverting them through the tactics of displaced and connotative sexual performance. The enforcers of the code in fact sanctioned this kind of veiled sexual play until 1933, when Joseph Breen took over the newly formed Production Code Administration. The thematic of connotative sexuality is also important to Alice A. Kuzniar's sustained queer reading of *Blonde Venus* in the terms of the closet, which draws attention to the staged spectacles in many Dietrich films. In musical numbers, Dietrich's performances break through the diegetic frame and knowingly critique the perversity of heterosexual norms. Mark Williams similarly reads Dietrich's late collaboration with Fritz Lang in *Rancho Notorious* (1952) as a sort of queering of the Western genre, or what he calls the "supra-Western" (of which *Johnny Guitar* [1954] would be another example); films that combined aging female leads with a camp aesthetic and a bending of genre and gender.

Finally, the volume's closing section, "(Auto-) Biography and the Archive," deals largely with Dietrich's attempt to stabilize her star persona and cultural authority in the face of the passing of time and the aging of her body. In "The Order of Knowledge and Experience," Amelie Hastie draws an interesting comparison between Dietrich's hybrid biography-advice manual, *Marlene Dietrich's ABC* (1984), Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (1979), and Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* (2002). These "ruminative volumes," ordered by the alphabetic principle, defy easy classification and refuse the linearity of biographical or argumentative discourse. Instead, these volumes authorize reading practices based on cross-reference rather than totalization. For Hastie, Dietrich emerges here as a flâneuse, liming the domestic space and practices of glamour, "keeping house, making up," as "fields of knowledge and labor" (p. 293) that grounded her cultural authority. Indeed, in Mary R. Desjardins's reading of Maria Riva's memoir about her mother, Dietrich emerges less as the aloof star than as the manager of the vast collective labor that was her persona, using her knowledge of the tricks and technologies of representation. Riva's account of her mother's disciplined self-fashioning tells of the self-exploitation that goes into the star persona. At the same time, in Riva's account of her own damaged childhood, Desjardins draws out an affinity between the Hollywood star system and the bourgeois family romance plotted by Sigmund Freud as compensatory fantasy logics. These fantasies tend to be based in ideologies of the authentic, for which the much-commented-upon aging of Dietrich's body is a well-suited figure. The real catches up with Dietrich the morph in the form of the mortality of the flesh. Both Desjardins and Judith Mayne in "Old Age and the Archive" note that Riva's memoir draws its own authority of enunciation in part from its careful and lurid narration of the aging Dietrich's corporeal abjection. Against this naturalized account of aging, Mayne's reading of Dietrich's late stage performances allows us to see the performer as her own archivist, leading her listeners by various tracks through her own history and that of the culture industry itself.

This is an academic collection, but one that the editors have capaciously construed, including for example, a piece by Steven Bach that reads like a coming of age story told against the background of Dietrich's rehearsals for her 1968 performance at the Ahmanson Theater. Likewise, the volume's penultimate contribution is an interview between film scholar Judith Mayne and Andrew Beaman, an actor who performed his show *Black Market Marlene* at the Dartmouth conference. What emerges from both of these pieces is what Beaman aptly calls "that self-knowingness that was the magic of Marlene" (p. 369). If the Hollywood image, as Koepnick reminds us, is always already thoroughly artificial, most stars nevertheless staked their personas on the disavowal of this fact. Dietrich, on the other hand, flaunted it. This quality of self-knowing–self-making as performance–is what makes Dietrich distinctive in Hollywood history.

Dietrich's knowing post-humanism unsettles easy distinctions of gender, genre, and nation. And yet, there is a specific pathos to many of these essays that lies less in the oft-mentioned struggle of the aging Dietrich against her aging body and the indifferent passage of time, but rather in the limits that were placed upon her artistry by the apparatus of the film industry itself. Although she exploited adeptly these limits, she did not overcome them. In his eulogy to Dietrich, the dramatist Heiner Müller writes, "my memory of her best films is the sorrow behind the perfection, an expression of longing for the films that were not made with her, for the roles that she did not play."[2]

Notes

[1]. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, fifth edition, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-844.

[2]. Heiner Müller, "Heiner Müller über Marlene Dietrich," in Heiner Müller, *Werke: Die Schriften*, ed. Frank Hörnigk (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag 2005), 420.

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