

# The star system in Europe. Star studies today

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In the interview with Axelle Ropert included in this monographic issue, the French filmmaker and critic reveals a childhood experience that many of us will be able to identify with:

'I ended up in cinema because of the power of actors and actresses. During summers in the countryside with my grandparents, the only way to watch movies was on television. That's how I discovered *Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, 1952) at age ten. It was an aesthetic revelation: the discovery of a universe of extraordinary actors and actresses. During this initiation period, the director's name was the last thing I was interested in.'

That Edenic phase — when the childhood of the viewer first surrendered to the captivating power of the star system — established some revealing rituals that were imbued with an encyclopedic zeal. Throughout the years, the photograph and program collections, the collectible cards, the TV series about actors, the filmographic lists of the stars which came to compose our first atlas of cinematographic memory — these were all replaced by the authorial canon based on the role of directors. And the performers were relegated to the background of analytical territory.

As a reaction to this central importance of the agents of *mise-en-scène*, which came to be known as *politique des auteurs*, a trend began to develop in cinematographic bibliography — almost in parallel, but much less visibly — which defended a hypothetical *politique des acteurs*. From Edgar Morin's pioneering contributions to the incomparable works of Richard Dyer, the study of performers as essential agents of cinematographic creation has become consolidated as the methodological approach we now call 'star studies.'

Christian Viviani, in his article 'To Capture the Ephemeral' (which we have included in this monographic work), wonders

whether actor studies 'will ever succeed in achieving scientific objectivity', given that this still-incipient field has a tendency towards the irrational and the unexpected. Indeed, stars vary from film to film and they adopt different techniques according to their characters: they are polysemic images, difficult to pin down. But even if they *live* in different scenarios, wear clothes from past centuries or portray, from one movie to the next, different nationalities and ideologies, star studies theorists and historians encourage us to study them as texts. Tytti Soila, in the introduction to the book *Stellar Encounters: Stardom in Popular European Cinema*, paraphrases Judith Butler by suggesting that 'stardom is not one but many, and to understand the phenomenon in this sense, we need to know its genealogies, its variations, its differences and its constructions on palimpsests.'

That child-like fascination for movie stars that Axelle Ropert recalls in the aforementioned interview was rooted, completely and utterly, in the story that emerged from classical Hollywood's 'dream factory'. The problem of the star system in Europe is that it is full of singularities, edges and shadows. The Hollywood model, meanwhile, based on flawless machinery, functions impeccably. This problem encourages comparison and the investigation of those singularities. The ambiguous and diverse landscape of European acting has not only generated a dialectic field within the films themselves (ever since Rossellini summoned Ingrid Bergman to his country, Italy, to change the history of cinema once and for all), it has also stirred up a critical, varied thinking towards the question of stardom. This issue of *Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema* emphasizes the different methodological contributions that have emerged from Europe regarding star studies (often linked to gender studies), both from the perspective of national cinema and from the transversal approach which considers the relation between acting and staging. In the end, it's all about furnishing ourselves with new tools in order to carry on exploring, in all its complexity and vastness, the (fortunately) inexhaustible world of cinema history.