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INTRODUCTION



Michèle Morgan: stardom and popular cinephilia

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Star studies, the approach that arose from the foundational work of [Richard Dyer](#) (1998 [1979], translated into French in 2004) has long been relegated to second-class status in the discipline of film studies in France. French academics have taken an interest in actors and actresses, especially those who have contributed to the work of 'canonical' filmmakers, and they have also written about acting from the perspective developed by James Naremore (1988, translated in 2014). However, the study of stars as an ideological, sociological and media phenomenon, associated with popular cinema and the reception practices of a broad, diverse audience, has encountered significant resistance to its recognition as an area of legitimate academic investigation – especially when it comes to French cinema.

The first, pioneering studies of this kind were written by English-speaking academics, particularly the works of Ginette Vincendeau on Jean Gabin (1993), the French star system (2000, translated in 2008) and Brigitte Bardot (2013, 2014), as well as Susan Hayward's work on Simone Signoret (2000, translated in 2013). A new generation of French researchers has endeavoured to pursue this path further: these include Gwénaëlle Le Gras, who published a book on Catherine Deneuve (2010), and Delphine Chedaleux, who wrote about the young leading men and women of French cinema of the German occupation (2016); working together, Le Gras and Chedaleux co-edited a volume on the genres, actors and actresses of French cinema from the 1930s to the 1960s (2012). There have been important contributions from long-term research projects, such as the ANR Cinépop50 programme, which ran from 2012 to 2015 ('Popular Film and Film-Going in Post-War France, 1945–1958', Le Gras and Sellier 2015), as well as innovative doctoral dissertations covering the cultural history of stardom (Juan 2014) and stars such as Gérard Philipe (Beaujeault 2018) and Delphine Seyrig (Moussa 2021). The first international conference on Danielle Darrieux, which took place on what would have been her 100th birthday, from 3–5 May 2017 at Bordeaux Montaigne University, led to the publication of a book edited by Gwénaëlle Le Gras and Geneviève Sellier (2020).

This special issue of *French Screen Studies*, devoted entirely to Michèle Morgan, is the result of a one-day conference organised on 29 February 2020, for the 100th anniversary of her birth. It follows the growing impetus of star studies in France,

exploring the figure of a French film star who, despite her paramount importance, has received little consideration or been completely ignored by the cinephile establishment.¹

Michèle Morgan (1920–2016) became a star at the age of only 17 when she made her first film, *Gribouille/Heart of Paris* (Marc Allégret, 1937). In spite of her exile in Hollywood from 1940 to 1945, she joined the uppermost echelon of film stardom during the first decade after the war, winning lavish praise and numerous prizes. Admired by the public for her legendary charisma and beauty, but also for her personality and the way she successfully embodied the values of modernity and emancipation, she made films with the most celebrated French directors from the 1930s to the 1960s. At the end of her exceptional career, undoubtedly because of her association with the ‘quality’ cinema scorned by the *politique des auteurs*, Morgan nevertheless largely disappeared from cinephiles’ collective memory: when she died, obituaries reductively described ‘an actress known for having “cinema’s most beautiful eyes”’ (d’Hugues 2016) and dwelt only on *Le Quai des brumes/Port of Shadows* (Marcel Carné, 1938) and *Remorques/Stormy Waters* (Jean Grémillon, 1940), as if her contribution to French cinema, which has also been neglected by scholarly literature, was limited to her pre-war films.

This issue intends not only to re-examine the emergence of Michèle Morgan’s persona and the social and cultural reception she received by way of movie magazines and ordinary viewers, but to explore the evolution of her image and the full breadth of her post-war career, analysing the ‘ideal couples’ that she formed on screen with Jean Marais and in real life with Henri Vidal, two popular young leading men of the era. While Morgan successfully established herself as a fixture of the spectacular colour films of the 1950s, at the end of the decade she appeared in two films alongside Bourvil as part of a couple that was both dissonant and mismatched; her final roles in the mid-1960s still highlighted her beauty at a time when most actresses of her age could no longer find parts. The articles making up this issue, which appear in chronological order so as to follow the progression of Morgan’s career, aim to provide new contexts for explaining the popular success of the unjustly forgotten star.

First, Thomas Pillard reconsiders Morgan’s pre-war emergence, analysing her rapid rise to stardom through her appearances in various media and her reception in popular magazines and their readers’ correspondence columns, extending the work of Ginette Vincendeau (1989) and Jonathan Driskell (2015). Combining the perspectives of cultural history, star and gender studies, the article examines the generational, gender and class implications of the multiple controversies and reactions surrounding Morgan, which were more complex, subtle and diverse than they might appear at first sight.

Geneviève Sellier looks at Morgan’s triumphant return to France in 1946, after five years of exile in Hollywood. The weekly readers’ correspondence columns of *Cinéma* from 1946 to 1956 reveal the way in which her pre-war persona underwent significant changes under the combined influence of the films she made with Jean Marais, Henri Vidal and Jean Gabin, as well as the twists and turns of her private life that were extensively publicised in the popular press. Morgan became a frequent source of controversy among the readers who regularly wrote in to *Cinéma*, while her persona took a more conservative direction in terms of gender norms.

Gwénaëlle Le Gras explores the image of the couple formed by Morgan and Henri Vidal from 1948 until Vidal's death in 1959. In real life and on screen, Vidal was perceived as Michèle Morgan's husband more than she was seen as his wife, a role reversal that was rare for the era and which endured on screen from their first pairing in *Fabiola* (Alessandro Blasetti, 1949) onwards. The on-screen *mise en abyme* of their real-life relationship widened the gap between their respective celebrity, reproducing it in fiction as a difference in social class punished by death, the loss of a child or alcoholism, all of which strangely echoed their private lives. The relative failure of their films together is certainly related to the way that their image as a couple conflicted with the dominant representations of the era.

Jean Montarnal analyses the colour films Michèle Morgan acted in during the mid-1950s, when she was at the pinnacle of her career and her popularity: Jean Delannoy's *Obsession* (1954), René Clair's *Les Grandes manœuvres/Summer Manoeuvres* (1955) and Claude Autant-Lara's *Marguerite de la nuit/Marguerite of the Night* (1955). These films confronted her with a technical challenge, adapting her photogenic qualities to colour, as well as a script-related challenge, adjusting her characters to her age, as a woman who was now well into her thirties. Colour provided a way of extending and renewing Morgan's persona, not only by magnifying her star status, but also by highlighting the social contradictions her stardom embodied and the emotional strain felt by her characters as they sought greater independence.

Raphaëlle Moine examines the two films that Michèle Morgan made with Bourvil, *Le Miroir à deux faces/The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1958), a darkly realist film directed by André Cayatte, and *Fortunat* (1960), a film set during the German occupation, directed by Alex Joffé. These films' defining characteristic is their presentation of Morgan and Bourvil as anomalous, mismatched couples that could only have come together under exceptional circumstances. Moreover, the contrast between the two characters, and between the two stars, provides both the narrative thrust and the main selling point of each film. Raphaëlle Moine analyses the disparity, especially the class contrast, at the heart of the partnership between Bourvil and Morgan, the relative position offered by both films to their male and female characters, as well as the performances of each star.

Despite a few occasional film and television appearances up to 1999, the 1960s were the final active phase in Morgan's career on screen. Ginette Vincendeau considers the range of Morgan's work during that decade and in particular a group of films in which Morgan plays the leading role as a seductive older woman paired with a younger man. These productions brought about changes in her persona, linking together two themes: that of an ageing but 'still beautiful', implicitly bourgeois, woman and the motif of a middle-aged woman's sexuality, portrayed as either 'tragic' or malicious.

This group of articles thus aims to show the prominent position occupied by Michèle Morgan in pre-war and post-war French cinema, and to explore the type of femininity she exemplified during the period preceding the women's liberation movement. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of considering stars' popular reception in specialised magazines – sources that are receiving increasing notice from researchers but are still too frequently left untapped in France. We are confident that future work will extend and amplify the movement to which this issue of *French Screen Studies* aims to contribute – just as Michèle Morgan, an aspiring actress who at a very young age had the ambition of becoming a movie star, wholly succeeded at making a lasting mark on the cinematic landscape of her time.

Note

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Thomas Pillard is a lecturer at Sorbonne Nouvelle University and a member of the IRCAV research centre. Combining cultural history and cultural studies, his research explores the history and archives of French cinema, the relationship between popular cinema and media culture, as well as cinema and television audience reception practices. He is the author of *Le Film noir français face aux bouleversements de la France d'après-guerre, 1946–1960* (Joseph K, 2014), *Bertrand Tavernier – Un dimanche à la campagne* (Atlande, 2015) and *Le Quai des brumes de Marcel Carné* (Vendémiaire, 2019). Since 2020, he has co-edited the journal *Genre en séries: cinéma, télévision, médias* along with Gwénaëlle Le Gras.

Geneviève Sellier is Emeritus Professor in Film Studies at the University Bordeaux Montaigne. Her publications include: *Jean Grémillon* (1989/2012); *Les Enfants du paradis* (1992/2012); *La Drôle de guerre des sexes du cinéma français, 1930–1956*, with Noël Burch (1996/2005) [*The Battle of the Sexes*, Duke University Press, 2013]; *La Nouvelle Vague, un cinéma au masculin singulier* (2005) [*Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2008]; and *Le cinéma au prisme des rapports de sexe*, with Noël Burch (2009). She is co-editor of *Cinémas et cinéphilies populaires dans la France d'après-guerre, 1945–1958*, (2015), and *Danielle Darrieux, la traversée du siècle* (2020) with Gwénaëlle Le Gras. She will publish in 2022 a book on French female cinephilia in the 1950s.

Filmography

Fabiola, 1949. Alessandro Blasetti, Italy/France.
Fortunat, 1960. Alex Joffé, France/Italy.
Les Grandes manœuvres, 1956. René Clair, France/Italy.
Gribouille, 1937. Marc Allégret, France/Germany.
Marguerite de la nuit, 1955. Claude Autant-Lara, France/Italy.
Le Miroir à deux faces, 1958. André Cayatte, France.
Obsession, 1954. Jean Delannoy, France.
Le Quai des brumes, 1939. Marcel Carné, France.
Remorques, 1941. Jean Grémillon, France.

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