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Journal of Film and Video, Volume 61, Number 3, Fall 2009, pp. 3-23 (Article)

Published by University of Illinois Press
DOI: [10.1353/jfv.0.0037](https://doi.org/10.1353/jfv.0.0037)



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“You Are Invited to Participate”¹: Interactive Fandom in the Age of the Movie Magazine

MARSHA ORGERON

THERE EXISTS A SIGNIFICANT CRITICAL LITERATURE about motion picture marketing and advertisement, especially concerning the related subject of American movie fan magazines. Much of this scholarship revolves around the gendering of discourse aimed at the fan magazine reader, especially over the course of the 1910s and 20s, and the degree to which these magazines increasingly spoke to women who were confronted with a range of entertainment options and related forms of consumerism.² However, there have been few attempts by scholars to account for the ways that the readers of movie magazines both were encouraged to behave and, indeed, responded to this institutionalizing of fan culture. Jane Gaines makes a point akin to this in her 1985 essay “War, Women, and Lipstick”: “Our most sophisticated tools of structural analysis can’t tell us who read fan magazines, in what spirit or mood, or in what social context. Were they read on magazine stands next to bus stops, in waiting rooms, or under the dryers at beauty parlors? Or maybe they were never read at all, but purchased only

for images, to cut up, tack on walls, or paste into scrapbooks” (46).

Where Gaines abandons this quest, casting it aside as an ancillary and perhaps even futile pursuit, I want to investigate one relatively unexplored avenue for understanding how fans both read and responded to movie magazines and the culture they created. Although this article begins somewhat conventionally with a discussion of how fan magazines from Hollywood’s heyday (the 1910s through the 40s) were encoded, its ultimate aim is to assess how the magazines shaped their readers’ understanding of their own relation to star culture. I argue here that one way to discern how the fan magazines motivated certain aspects of fan behavior is by looking to fan letters. This strikes me as an especially important task given the reluctance of many scholars to venture into this admittedly difficult territory. The tendency to abandon fans’ reactions at the theoretical level leaves us at a critical impasse that is not, I think, entirely insurmountable. By looking at fan magazines and the ways in which they constructed and trained a particular kind of ideal reader, and then by turning to written evidence in the form of fan mail for substantiation of the ways that at least some movie fans represented themselves, we emerge with a sense of the interactive culture that was being generated in the magazines’ pages.³ I cannot hope to answer Gaines’s particular lines of inquiry; however, I can suggest some very concrete ways that the fan magazine reader was spoken to and then spoke with regard to the cultures of celebrity and fandom.

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In her work on celebrity, Adrienne McLean notes, “The relationship of the fan magazine itself to advertising, product tie-ins, and consumerism is clear, but that women experienced fan magazine discourse only or predominantly as consumers is not” (*Being Rita Hayworth* 74). Indeed, I hope to both affirm and extend McLean’s formulation here by analyzing at least one way that fans acted beyond, but not outside of, the commercial paradigm laid out in the magazines. Fan mail reveals the ways that fans were led not just to an ongoing cycle of consumption, but also to aspirations of a social nature involving both star qualities and the stars themselves. These ambitions often exceeded the boundaries of interaction offered in the magazines’ pages. As the following analysis demonstrates, the magazines sought to train their readers to take an active role in their spectatorial and consuming lives, but this training also led fans elsewhere, particularly to the stars themselves. Fan magazines are, as Anne Morey writes in an essay about the fiction published in their pages, “readily available reservoirs of information about how viewers might have used films” (334). I would add that this reservoir of information can lead us to other, even more personal sources of knowledge about how viewers interacted with the motion picture industry.⁴

Across the body of fan magazines—*Photoplay*, *Motion Picture World*, *Motion Picture Classic*, *Modern Screen*, *Motion Picture*, and so on—a “discourse of empowerment,” by which I mean literally enabling or permitting, recurs that can help us conceive of the relationship between this print element of the motion picture industry and its spectators and fans. Gaylyn Studlar argues that the Hollywood system’s “goal was to create a most intense—and profitable—fascination among the moviegoing public”; however, the fan magazines operated both inside the commercial realm of material fascination and outside of it in the realm of a more private, emotional, and less easily satiable fascination with the stars and their personal lives (*This Mad Masquerade* 2). Fan magazines intended to transform spectators of celebrity

culture into participators *in* celebrity culture. Even when playing on their reader’s insecurities, often by invoking the disparity between readers’ ordinary lives and celebrities’ extraordinary lives, the fan magazines urged readers to think themselves worthy of participating in the culture of celebrity and fandom.

To achieve this, fan magazines relied heavily on promoting the concept of interactivity, repeatedly asking their readers to move out of the somewhat passive role of spectatorship to pursue a wide range of activities: from gaining a sense of expertise with which they could demonstrate mastery of knowledge about films and stars, to writing letters asking questions, offering opinions, and even making contact with the stars themselves, to, on occasion, trying to become a star through fan magazine contests, perhaps the ultimate and in some ways most radical act of sanctioned participation. Indeed, star search contests were not alone in their attempts to do what a good deal of the content of the movie magazines seemed intent on for mostly commercial reasons: reproducing spectators not only as consumers but also as *actors*, encouraging them to recreate themselves by sending their images, thoughts, money, and so on into a remote public sphere.⁵

Kathryn Fuller points out that by 1912 the nascent fan magazine *Motion Picture Story Magazine* had become “a lively, interactive colloquium for the sharing of movie fans’ knowledge and creative interests” (*Picture Show* 137). The magazines urged readers to consider themselves linked in concrete ways to the film industry and to a community of likeminded fans, largely by creating personal desires that worked to sustain an ongoing material relationship between fans and the film industry. Fuller contends that after 1916 there was a significant change in content for *Motion Picture Magazine* (the word “story” was dropped around this time), which “removed many of the interactive features that let fans contribute to the publication” (*Picture Show* 145). She further argues that post-1917 *Photoplay* “never provided movie fans the direct participation in the production of movie fan culture that *Motion Picture*

Story Magazine had provided for readers in the early 1910s” (*Picture Show* 152). These characterizations minimize the powerful elements of interactivity that remained in place throughout the pages of the magazines for several decades. What follows illustrates precisely the ways that interactivity remained central to the content of a wide spectrum of the movie magazines, including *Photoplay*, published from the teens through the decline of the golden age.

Critical to this discussion of spectatorial access and interactivity, of course, is some acknowledgment of the role the promotion of these illusions played within the larger context of the Hollywood fantasy, which the magazines both benefited from and encouraged. Always self-serving to the magazines’, their advertisers’, and the motion picture industry’s interests, these interactive strategies intended to affect spectatorial/reader behavior. Across the body of the fan magazines there are three readily identifiable, albeit interconnected, modes of discourse through which the publications and their advertisers attempted to address, include, and activate readers. First, the magazines encouraged readers to consider themselves valuable critics and correspondents whose opinions could impact the industry and especially the stars. Second, the magazines relentlessly promoted self-improvement, a task with clear connections to the commercial interests of their advertisers. Third, the magazines included a startling array of contests—a veritable subgenre within the fan magazines—that tapped into the aforementioned ideas, all of which celebrate the goal of winning but try to make the act of playing the game the goal.

Making Fans Act

The magazines’ efforts to endow fans with a sense that what they said and did mattered helped to create a thriving culture of fan interactivity. *Motion Picture*’s June 1925 “We’re Asking You” column tested readers on knowledge generated by the articles in the magazine and offered opportunities to win contests (such as a \$10 prize for an original star-based

limerick) through a series of questions meant to stimulate a response from the reader (80). Their “The Answer Man” column offered no financial reward and relative anonymity to the correspondent; however, it was packed with answers to readers’ inquiries: “Colleen Moore is twenty-two” or “Address Ramon Novarro at the Metro-Goldwyn Company.”⁶ The *New Movie* magazine regularly published a photo montage, asking readers, “Do you know these stars?” and provided answers on another page of the issue (30). The scope and density of such arrangements within the pages of a magazine such as *Motion Picture* suggests the degree to which correspondence was being rigorously cultivated in the magazine reader. Fan magazines regularly encouraged epistolary responses from their readers and often rewarded them as well.

Letters of inquiry, opinion, and advice offered fans an outlet for their ideas and opinions and also allowed an immediate and minimally exertive way for them to connect themselves to celebrity discourse. For the magazines, these elements conspired to keep readers hooked (Will I win the contest? Will my letter be answered? What will I learn next week?). Fan letters, which emerged when fans sought out stars’ studio addresses from magazine editors, made the desire to emerge from spectatorial anonymity tangible.⁷ The fan magazines encouraged this relationship, publishing studio addresses for top star talent to facilitate correspondence.⁸ *Photoplay* published a regular “Questions & Answers” column in which they answered inquiries about the industry—not surprisingly, mostly about the stars—as long as writers “avoid questions that would call for unduly long answers” and “do not inquire concerning religion, scenario writing, or studio employment.”⁹ *Motion Picture*’s June 1925 “Cheers and Hisses” column instructed readers, “Your opinions on subjects relating to the movies and their players may be worth actual money to you, if you can express them clearly in a snappy letter of one to three hundred words”; the best letter received \$5 (82). Fan opinions, then, were occasionally

Cheers and Hisses

Letters from fans all over the world, telling what they love and loathe in pictures, and what they adore and abhor in the players

Page the Ad Man

DEAR EDITOR: I was peacefully reading the newspaper last night when, all of sudden, an ad hit me in the eye. It read this way: "Stupendous drama of the age with an all-star cast of four thousand. Yesterday's audience squirmed with delight," etc., etc.

Whereupon I dashed down the street and fell into a line two blocks long, as the rain was pouring down, as the rain was pouring down, as the rain was pouring down. Of *Robin Hood*, *Peter the Great*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Last Laugh*. And now, tonight, the "most stupendous drama of the age!"

Halt an hour later I was gazing upon five tons of elephants, four million dollars' worth of furniture, and a heroine saved. I waited three two performances to see "the most stupendous drama of the age!"

And now I'm out for the guy who wrote the ad!

Of course, he never saw the picture. If they would only have let him write the story, putting into it all the pep, suspense and thrill that he put into his ad, "the most stupendous drama of the age" might have come true, and I would have seen a real picture. I can see elephants any old day by going to the zoo!

Yours for better pictures,

H. B. B.,
Chicago, Ill.

Others Agree With You

WARREN KEENEAN is not appreciated half enough. Who didn't admire him as Bannan in *The Covered Wagon*. Have we a star who could have played that part as well? Then there was his portrayal in *Captain Blood*. And so far as looks are concerned, he is one of the handsomest men on the screen.

A. O'B.,
Fargo, N. D.

Mangled Stories

IAM writing both to criticize and to praise *The Wife of the Centaur*. Why do the directors choose to dramatize books which they know will be mangled before they can pass the censors, blue Sunday laws, etc.? The book was a splendid piece of work, the best of its kind, and after I had read it I looked forward to seeing it on the screen. How I was disappointed! I do not advocate putting broad stories on the screen. Why ruin a good book to make it conform to the censor's opinion? I don't see why the directors attempt it. Far better that it be left alone.

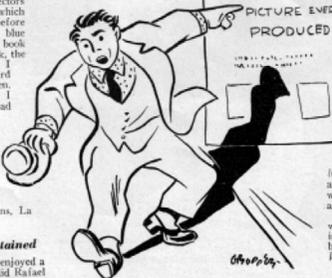
D. C. W.,
New Orleans, La

All Ages Are Entertained

I DON'T know when I have enjoyed a showplay more than I did *Rafael*

YOUR opinions on subjects relating to the movies and their players may be worth actual money to you, if you can express them clearly in a snappy letter of one to three hundred words. A five-dollar prize is awarded for the best letter published and illustrated on this page; one dollar is paid for the excerpts printed from others. Write us an interesting letter, giving reasons for your likes and dislikes. Sign your full name and give your address. We will use initials only if requested. Send to CHEERS AND HISSES, 175 Duffield St., Brooklyn, N. Y.

Whereupon I dashed down the street and fell into a line two blocks long, as the rain was pouring down



absorbing, fast-moving story of romance and adventure that is finely adapted to the screen. The settings are all exceptional for their scenic beauty; but, of course, the outstanding figure is the superb acting of Milton Sills.

Oh, I wasn't the only person in that darkened theater to lose my middle-aged, every-day self in the delightful land of "make-believe." A portly gentleman, who sits behind a glass door marked "Attorney-at-law, from nine to the morning until four in the afternoon," occupied several seats on my right. He evidently enjoyed the play just as much as I did. On my left, a high-school senior confided that she got a tremendous "kick" from that picture.

LAURA M. LARABEE,
Peabody, Mass.

Wholesale Thanks

IM here to hand a bouquet to every one connected with the movies. But for the movies I'd be bored stiff. I like them even though I am not working so hard to please us fans.

E. F.,
New Castle, Pa.

Praise for Pola

I AM a very ardent Pola Negri fan. And I have a reason. That reason is her admirable fighting spirit in the face of seemingly insurmountable barriers. The barriers of racial differences; the malicious envy of some home-grown stars (which was only natural, even tho' it was uncharitable, like the anger of my dog when I get another); the confusion and misunderstandings which I get another); the confusion and misunderstandings which I must have resulted due to other environments and tense times. I understand Miss Negri lived thru some terrible and sorrowful scenes in her own country during the war.

And she how she has adapted herself to the conditions she found herself in. She has added the quality of stability to her character, or so it seems to me, who base my opinions on what I have read, heard, her work that I have seen. That is the reason I believe she will follow her ambitions and become one of the world's great actresses. She has shown her staying powers.

She seems more kind than cruel, as tho' she were naturally kind but a little spoiled, not stopping to think of others' feelings a little things. Yet, I know she could not be selfish nor without compassion nor ungenerous nor less than great-hearted, for we know she cared for the husband who died of tuberculosis.

Never would I call her overbearing, and she seems very gracious. At least she was in *Forbidden Paradise*. As for "eloping with a hermit," she would if she felt that she was following the trueness that dwells in all of us.

To think own self be true" and "If to kiss a king or kick a cook (both words, of course) as the spirit moves one hermit! I feel that way myself. And *Five la Pola Negri!* J. P., Tucson, Arizona.
(Continued on page 94)

worthy not only of publication and response, but also of remuneration.

The magazines endowed this sense of value in an effort to motivate the stream of contributions and, ultimately, magazine purchases; to achieve this they consistently emphasized that readers' opinions shaped the industry and were often valuable enough to warrant compensation. In an example notable for its conventionality across the magazines, *Photoplay* ran a regular letter column in which "The Real Critics, The Fans, Give Their Views," rewarding its best letters with \$25, \$10, and \$5 prizes.¹⁰ Beyond dangling a financial reward, the magazines encouraged readers to think that their letters

created a significant impact on the careers of their recipients. Mark Larkin's 1928 *Photoplay* article "What Happens to Fan Mail?" points out that fan magazine stories "invariably result in a big increase in letters" to the stars (40). He wrote that if there "is a lull in a star's mail . . . she stays off the screen," suggesting a cause and effect model for celebrity as well as implying a surprising power inherent in the fan's pen. Larkin's sentiment should also be read as a self-congratulatory pat on the back for the fan magazines for wielding a significant amount of power over celebrities' fate.

The idea of the influential fan is prevalent across the body of the magazines of

Photo 1: Fan magazines encouraged readers to cultivate and share their opinions about films and stars by offering both potential publication and compensation opportunities for "interesting" letters. *Motion Picture* June 1925: 82.

this era: a 1919 *Picture Play* article, Herbert Howe's "New Stars for Old," considers itself "A discussion—in which you are invited to participate—concerning some of the screen favorites which we, the fans, are about to elect to stellar honors" (27).¹¹ The pre-woman's suffrage democratic principle here is rather fascinating, as is the mode of direct address that frames this process as if it were a modern-day chat/board room in which important star-making decisions were being made. This is a curious—if imaginary—community-building project, in which readers are constructed as part of a powerful voting collective. Howe elaborates on his basic point, noting,

It is the public that makes the star . . . You and I, who patronize the motion pictures, are the real star electors. Your dime and my dime placed on the box-office sill when a certain player appears is the most effective ballot, and letters to the editors of motion-picture magazines or film concerns in regard to new players combine toward the nomination of that player for stardom. The answer-and-queries departments of the various fan publications are excellent criterions by which to judge the increasing popularity of film people.

This article's encouragement of the fans to "vote" through participation in both the world of the fan magazines and the box office might be seen as solely working in industry-serving ways. But perhaps less obvious is the way that such a conception of stardom sought to empower the fan with a sense of control over the film industry, a premise that is only partly overstated. Howe endowed readers with a sense that they had a direct impact on the marketplace through their participation in or refusal of certain aspects of consumer culture.¹² Howe's point is that the fans make the stars and are valuable contributors to the culture created in the pages of the magazine. Those whom the fans might perceive as holding the real positions of power—the studios, executives, directors, published critics—are represented here as subject to the fans' desires, expressed by both letter and almighty

dollar. This paradigm suggests that if fans act, the industry might just respond.

Although the magazines solicited opinions from their readers, more conventional advice columns—versions of which appear in virtually all of the fan magazines—offered readers another opportunity to contact the magazines for access to seemingly star-quality information in return. These "free" services allowed writers to ask questions—typically about beauty and lifestyle—which would be answered by experts or guest star columnists. *Movie Mirror's* "Beauty Page" touted that "Gloria Mack Will Answer You Personally" in response to the question of "What's bothering you, blackheads, makeup problems, how to do your hair, or some special, individual beauty problem? This is a MOVIE MIRROR service, and comes to you at no cost" (12). This column encouraged fans to use the framework of the fan magazine to evaluate themselves and then to do something about their "problems." *Photoplay* united the principles of fan writing and star fascination in "What should I do?"—a column that billed itself as "Your problems answered by Claudette Colbert" (8+). In the November 1949 issue, all but one of the letters were written by women, all asking for advice about their home lives (Should I divorce or not? How can I make my husband happy?). The alluring idea that a star like Colbert might intercede in the personal life of anyone with the ability to drop a letter in the mail was mirrored in a variety of magazines that solicited the aid of stars—or at least the aid of their names and images—to give the impression that they were affecting the daily lives of ordinary fans in a personalized fashion.

Self-improvement was, in fact, doled out in the magazines in a variety of forms. In *Modern Screen*, "Katherine Albert tells how to overcome self-consciousness" in part by encouraging interested readers to clip out and mail her a request "to organize a dramatic society in my home town" (18).¹³ Trying to convince readers that the stars are just as "terribly self-conscious" as readers might be, Albert welcomes them to write to her if they would like information "on any matter which pertains to

New Stars for Old

A discussion—in which you are invited to participate—concerning some of the screen favorites which we, the fans, are about to elect to stellar honors.

By Herbert Howe

THE motion-picture firmament has been likened to the one which lights up earth's canopy at night. There are the fixed stars, the roving planets, and the comets which flare up and disappear.

But the stars of the screen change much more rapidly than most of the heavenly bodies. They are continually growing brighter or dimmer, appearing and disappearing, according to their ability to reflect the light of public interest and approval. For it is the public that makes the star.

That was demonstrated in the beginning of the film industry. Back in the days when Griffith began making screen history, Biograph, which employed him, did not see fit to feature its players. But public interest became centered upon the little girl with golden curls—upon the girl with the quaint, wistful face—and some of the others of that famous company. And thus it was as inevitable as fate that Mary Pickford, Mae Marsh, and their talented associates, leaped into fame that outlived that of the organization which gave them their start.

With certain striking exceptions, the stars of the screen have a much shorter period in which to shine than those of the stage. That is because the screen star is seen by most of the fans so much more often. The edge once gone from anticipation, the interest wanes. When a favorite has exhibited his or her bag of tricks, we eagerly look for another with new personality and new methods. And so the producers, wise men that they are, are constantly developing new stellar material to aid them in their ceaseless competition for our dimes, with an eye carefully turned toward public approval all the while. There was a time when these magnates believed it possible to "make" a star. As each picture should have a star, according to an opinion formerly current, and as there were not enough genuine favorites elected by the public, the producer made his own selection. This experiment has proved too expensive. Now the heads of the successful film concerns carefully consult the gauge of public opinion before starring a player. There may still exist a few with the temerity—and the money—to place personal friends in stellar positions, but they are few. You and I, who patronize the motion pictures, are the real star electors. Your dime and my dime placed on the box-office sill when a certain player appears is the most effective ballot, and letters to editors of motion-picture magazines or film concerns in regard to new players combine toward the nomination of that player for stardom. The answers-and-queries departments of the various fan publications are excellent criterions by which to judge the increasing popularity of film people.

You will behold Jean Paige as a star, I believe.

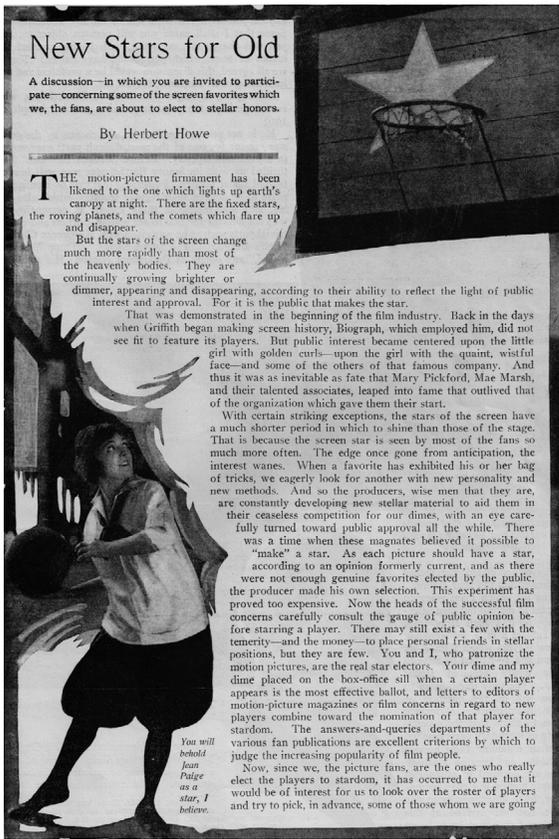


Photo 2: Herbert Howe's article constructs the idea of the influential fan who can impact rapidly changing screen star line-ups because "the heads of successful concerns carefully consult the gauge of public opinion before starring a player." *Picture Play* Nov. 1919: 27.

the study of dramatic art" (89). Albert's push for individuals to start dramatic societies in their hometowns is done both in the name of self-improvement and with the hopes that it "may lead to the discovery of a real genius." In other words, interacting with Albert and getting guidance on how to pursue one's own dramatic talents allowed readers to begin to act out their own fantasies of stardom and performance, to begin the process of becoming a star.

Although fan magazines were always imbued with Hollywood's corporate ideology, as in all of the examples just noted, by training fans to interact with both pen and pocketbook they still offered a variety of ways for women to become actively involved with movie culture and to, in the process, negotiate their own identities

beyond their everyday, lived experiences. As such, fan magazines functioned much in the way that Richard Ohmann perceives other magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal* operating at the turn of the century, as a way for readers to become a part of a virtual community of "like-minded readers across the nation" (220). The fan magazines certainly possessed a socializing element, on both symbolic and literal levels. They linked women in particular to the public space of movie theaters, to patterns of correspondence and consumption, and to a broad community of fans and spectators. Movie magazines also offered their readers tools with which they could negotiate their own positions in the world. The tenor of the magazines' prevailing discourse—the formation of opinions,

the letter writing, the reward seeking, the product buying, the contest entering—all operate within the same framework of empowerment, providing a very tangible, attainable mode of participation for the otherwise potentially disconnected fan.

Buying into Celebrity

Self-improvement was not always free. In fact, it typically came at a cost—certainly for the price of the magazines themselves, but also sometimes for advice or products. What I have been discussing so far have been subtle modes of advertisement, some in the guise of behavioral encouragement. In the explicit advertising found in the fan magazines, we witness another component of this culture of exchange and of a seemingly larger project of conditioning the magazine's readers. An advertisement in the December 1926 *Motion Picture Classic* attests to the different methods by which the fan magazine reader was being trained to engage in correspondence, here in the name of self-beautification by writing to Lucille Young, beauty expert, for advice. "Wouldn't your life be happier with a clear, smooth, lovely complexion—and with eyes, hair and figure to complete the picture of perfect womanhood?" asks Young in the text of the advertisement (9). The clip-and-mail format of the advertisement is found throughout both the advertising and the non-advertising sections of the magazines. Here the potential consumer is urged on with the lure of satisfied customers' testimonial letters included under sections for skin, hair, and eyelash improvement. These letters are highly reminiscent of the solicited fan mail columns, which offer another version of this same logic.

In a similar mode, a 1926 advertisement for Dr. Lawton's Beautifier does not simply advertise the benefits of the product, but rather presents its pitch with a series of questions the reader should ask herself (81). This quiz, of course, intends to lead respondents to purchase Dr. Lawton's product, which he provides on a ten-day free-trial basis with a clip-and-mail

coupon, and which promises to endow "youthful beauty all your life." Readers well schooled in the art of correspondence would have encountered such campaigns with a degree of recognition; they marked a break from "free services" but used familiar strategies established by cash-free exchanges elsewhere in the magazine's pages.

These advertisements often ventured into the familiar world of self-improvement by tapping into readers' insecurities. They encouraged an active stance against their readers' presumed physical deficiencies in a fashion reminiscent of the fan complaints/praises noted earlier. The foundational logic in all of these cases is that if you have a problem with something or someone, you should do something about it. A January 1935 *Modern Screen* advertisement for Camay soap deploys a rhetoric that unites this culture of activity and judgment with the logic of the contest. The ad begins with a pivotal question: "Why is one of these girls winning and the other losing this private BEAUTY CONTEST?" (3). The ad explains that "you cannot avoid these contests, for everyone you meet judges your beauty, your charm, your skin." In a convergence of the ideas of judgment and evaluation that readers were encouraged to employ in their thinking about the industry and about themselves, this advertisement invokes a critical third context—that of the contest—which has the potential to literally link the fan to the star, as I will discuss momentarily. Although not a star, per se, the winning woman in the Camay image looks like one: she is costumed, surrounded by admirers, made-up, and bejeweled to appear on this small screen as an object of desire and identification. She is a conduit for the readers' aspirations to move from the ordinary to the star-like, from loser to winner.

An earlier, 1932 Camay campaign also functioned within this ideological-commercial framework. "Three Girls competed in this beauty contest and she who Won had a Lovely Skin," reads the slogan at the top of the page (75). The ad blatantly employs the metaphor of the beauty

Why is one of these girls winning
and the other losing this private
BEAUTY CONTEST



BOTH GIRLS have smart clothes and wear them smartly. Both have attractive figures, lovely hair. Yet one is getting all of the attention and all of the compliments.

One is winning, while the other is losing one of those little beauty contests which are a part of the daily life of every woman.

You cannot avoid these contests, for everyone you meet judges your beauty, your charm, *your skin*.

The daily use of Camay, the Soap of Beautiful Women, can change a

dull, drab skin into a fresh, lovely complexion, and help *you* win *your* beauty contests.

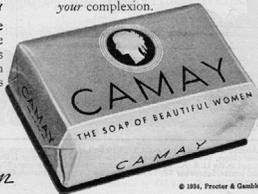
Camay's delightfully perfumed lather is smooth and rich, made up of millions of tiny Beauty Bubbles that cleanse and refresh your skin.

WOMEN EVERYWHERE PRAISE CAMAY

Thousands of women have written recently praising the mildness of Camay. "It is as gentle as cream," says a girl from New England. "The lather is

wonderfully smooth and soothing," writes a young matron from the South, "and it keeps the skin smoother and clearer than any other soap."

Try Camay yourself. Just see how much this pure, gentle, creamy-white beauty soap can do for *your* skin. See how much it can improve *your* complexion.



CAMAY
The Soap of Beautiful Women.

© 1935, Procter & Gamble

Photo 3: This Camay advertisement works with the prevailing logic of the fan magazines by uniting the oft-invoked principles of judgment and evaluation with the logic of the contest. *Modern Screen* Jan. 1935: 3.

contest to represent the nature of women's daily lives: "If you are a woman, you are in a daily Beauty Contest. You are competing with every woman in your social set . . . with hundreds who are strangers to you. But if your skin is lovely, you will win! Let gentle Camay help!" The advertisement invokes a clearly gendered sense of being a perpetual contestant in the game of being attractive. But it also urges the reader to buy that which might equip her with a fight-

ing chance in this unavoidable environment of competition. Three drawn images appear in the advertisement, one depicting a woman playing piano flanked by two admiring men. The caption reads, "When she entered the room, she entered one of life's daily Beauty Contests . . . But her skin was exquisite. She won! The others lost!"

By uniting the logic of self-evaluation with that of the contest and the sales pitch, the Camay Beauty Contest campaign employed

the tools of the trade in a particularly confluent fashion. As *Photoplay* editor James Quirk argued in a promotional booklet aimed at potential advertisers,

When women go to the movies they go to see themselves not in the mirror but in the ideal world of fancy . . . New desires are instilled, new wants implanted, new impulses to spend are aroused. These impulses may be at the moment only vague longings, but sooner or later they will crystallize into definite wants . . . The motion picture paves the way. *Photoplay* carries on, renewing the impulses caught on the screen. It gives your product's address and telephone number. (qtd. in Rorty 254)

Quirk is remarkably self-conscious here about the commercial environment his magazine was creating and about the degree to which it could influence the behavior of readers. Although espousing a fairly simplistic injection theory of the influence of the movies and of advertising upon the female spectator/reader, Quirk's pitch was clearly heeded by many of his advertisers. Indeed, the magazine—and others like it—seemed well practiced in the art of creating and shaping readers' impulses. Emerging from this logic of theater-to-magazine marketing, star endorsements provided an especially seductive commercial lure for magazine readers. Lupe Velez stars in a 1932 Woodbury's cream campaign that asks readers, "With a skin naturally moist and luscious does Lupe Velez need Creams too?" (67).¹⁴ The advertisement reports that a Hollywood dermatologist "says 'yes,'" thereby supplementing star endorsement with medical support. It also urges readers to consider themselves "like" Lupe Velez by virtue of the fact that they, too, surely must be in need of creams in order to obtain the skin quality projected in the advertisement's image. Indeed, an image of Velez bisects the advertisement, and a coupon at the bottom of the page allows readers to check off their skin types and skin problems in order to receive advice. Correspondence, self-improvement, and commercial

exchange all coexist in this and a host of other star-endorsement campaigns.

The fan magazines bombarded women with commercial information: dresses, shoes, hair products, face creams, and stockings all promised to make them as glamorous as the stars who often advertised them. Gaylyn Studlar has theorized that fan magazine readers participated in "an identification with stardom as a kind of 'masquerade,' a play with identity" ("Perils of Pleasure" 275). But it was also more than just "play," as we shall see in the final section of this article. Through the idealization of certain star attributes, both physical and behavioral, the magazines encouraged women to *buy into* certain ideas about the contemporary world and their place in it. And despite the fact that women were, certainly by the 1920s, the primary target of these campaigns, on rare occasions the fan magazines also addressed male readers. Buescher Band Instrument Co. placed an advertisement in the February 1928 *Photoplay* with an image of a man playing a saxophone while a woman at the piano looks admiringly at him. The ad reads,

6 weeks ago he clipped the coupon. Other fellows had left him in the social background. Girls avoided him. He was missing all the modern fun. Then, one day, he read an advertisement. It held out a promise of popularity if he would only learn to play a Buescher True Tone Saxophone. . . . That was 6 weeks ago, and today he's "popularity" itself. Always welcome everywhere. (138)¹⁵

Although the aforementioned coupon claims that it carries with it no obligation, only the promise of free literature, clearly the ad intends for the respondent to eventually purchase an instrument in his pursuit of social acceptance. Playing on readers' potential social anxieties, the advertisement merges notions of free advice that would have been familiar to the regular fan magazine reader with an impending economic exchange that looms on the horizon should the respondent desire the social success the ad and its image promise.¹⁶

With a skin naturally MOIST and LUSCIOUS

does LUPE VELEZ need Creams too?

Hollywood dermatologist says "Yes". Advises her to preserve that firm skin roundness, so childish and so seductive... by using Woodbury's Creams.

Shiny cheeks look young, Lupe Velez believes. But a skin has to be immaculately clean and free to dare to follow that fashion. Lupe Velez softens her skin with cream, washes it with soap and water, powders lavishly, but *then* rubs the powder off again... to give her face those youthful highlights.

If you have dry skin, you need creams, obviously. One application of Woodbury's Cold Cream on a rough, parched skin will show you at once how much your skin has hungered for those softening oils.

But Lupe Velez hasn't dry skin. Characteristic of her ardent southern type is her rich "plummy" complexion. Her skin never flakes or peels. It blooms like the lush flowers of a tropic night. Yet the dermatologist who guards the complexions of famous screen stars advises Lupe Velez to use Woodbury's Creams regularly. Because, he says:

"Underneath a baby's skin, a supporting layer of fat cells keeps the skin full and firm. When that cushion of fat falls away, the skin loses its rounded fullness and begins to sag and wrinkle. Exposure, poor circulation, the dry-heated air of our homes, low-calorie diets, all these tend to exhaust that youthful layer of fat beneath the skin. Even if your skin is not dry on the surface, use Woodbury's Cold Cream to replenish that deep, natural cushion of fat which keeps the skin firm and smooth. Woodbury's Cold Cream is excellent for this purpose, for its fine oils are readily taken up by the skin tissues.

"Woodbury's Facial Cream (used as powder base) spreads a film over the skin which protects it from exposure, prevents it from drying out, keeps clogging dust and impurities out of the pores."

Give your skin this same wise care... Woodbury's Cold Cream twice a day for softening and smoothing the skin... Woodbury's Facial Cream under powder before going out. Both on sale (with other



LUPE VELEZ... PHOTOGRAPHED IN HOLLYWOOD BY STEIGEN

USE THIS COUPON FOR DELICIOUS SAMPLES AND PERSONAL BEAUTY ADVICE

John H. Woodbury, Inc., 6212 Alfred Street, Cincinnati, Ohio
In Canada, John H. Woodbury, Ltd., Perth, Ontario
I would like advice on my skin condition as checked, also would like containing generous samples of Woodbury's Cold Cream, Facial Cream, and Facial Powder. Also copy of "Index to Loveliness." For this I enclose 10¢ to partly cover cost of mailing.

Oil Skin Coarse Pores Blackheads Flabby Skin Dry Skin Wrinkles Sallow Skin Pimples
For generous sample of one of Woodbury's Tissue, Foamless Shampoo, enclose 10 cents additional and indicate type of scalp. Normal Scalp Dry Scalp Oily Scalp

Name _____ Address _____
City _____ State _____

Take in on Woodbury's, every Friday evening, 6 to 8 P.M. Eastern Daylight Saving Time. Loan Belasco and his Woodbury Orchestra. Hear Joan Parker's authoritative beauty talks. WABC and Columbia Network.

Photo 4: This Woodbury's cream advertisement not only depicts movie star Lupe Velez as having remediable skin problems "just like the rest of us," but also employs the familiar clip-and-mail format for advice and product procurement. Motion Picture Oct. 1932: 67.

Although much of this commercial solicitation issued directly from manufacturers, the magazines were not above crossing the line from conveying information to peddling paid-for products and services. *Screen Book* developed what they termed a "FREE SHOPPING Service," which called out to readers, "Outfit yourself in the styles the stars are wearing!" (41).¹⁷ The advertisement, featuring the "Radio Pictures' lovely starlet" Betty Furness in a variety of outfits, promises that "you can buy the same models from Hollywood stores—clothing bearing the Hollywood label—conveniently at bargain prices through SCREEN BOOK'S new and unique shopping service." Readers could fill out and clip a "shopping service coupon," prepaying for any of the items pictured on the

page and indicating their sizes. Furthermore, readers were instructed to also "clip out photographs of articles ordered and attach to this coupon," an act that seems superfluous to the aim of ordering clothing, but one that involves an additional act of engagement with the magazine reminiscent of scrapbook-making endeavors. The captions under each image of Betty Furness dressed in a variety of outfits aim to convince readers that these items were chosen by the starlet herself, encouraging them to select items individually or even to buy entire outfits that are purportedly Furness's personal choice. The magazine reader could dress like a star, or at least like a starlet, simply by reading the magazine and then deciding to buy into the magazine's own shopping service. Spectator-

ship and consumerism were consistently collapsed in the ways the magazines addressed the fan, who is consistently represented as living in this realm of unavoidable—to use the logic of the Camay advertisement—competition and game playing.

It's Not Whether You Win or Lose . . .

One climax, of sorts, for these foundational fan activities—the letters, the cultivation of judgment and opinion, the participation in a commercial culture intent on making the fan want to inch a little closer to being star-perfect—was the fan magazine contest, which manifested itself in a variety of forms during the silent and early sound eras. An early iteration of the “star popularity” contest appeared in a February 1914 issue of *Motion Picture Story Magazine*. This “Great Artist Contest” allowed the reader to clip out a 3 × 6 portion of the magazine and to cast votes—ten votes for a favorite set of male/female players (not necessarily working with the same company) and five for a second set (161).¹⁸ The contest appeared not in the main section of the magazine but rather within the advertising section, placed on a page beneath solicitation for a press, jobs for railway mail clerks, artistic bookbinding, and an architect specializing in picture theaters. Picking the “great artist,” then, is akin to making other consumer decisions that required readers to act on what they had read in the magazine’s pages.

The great artist or favorite star contests continued throughout the studio era. *Photoplay*’s November 1949 “Choose Your Star” contest claimed that it received “an avalanche of votes,” reporting almost 60,000 for each category of male and female star (31). The brief article reporting the winners—John Derek and Allene Roberts—affirms the value-based logic supporting fan participation: “at the studios—where your opinion counts the most—there should be big plans brewing for the girls and boys you are turning into stars.” *Screen Guide*’s ongoing “Movie Poll” acquired marketing information for the magazine and its advertisers and rewarded winning letters with such items

as a Westmore makeup kit or a set of silver (47). Submitted letters were supposed to be based on the topics given in the monthly movie poll, such as the following: “What star would you like most as a friend?” “What brand of cigarette do you smoke?” “What question would you like to ask Hedy Lamarr?” “What brand of soap do you use?” and “What type of movie do you avoid?” In addition to printing the winning letter, the column also reported the top answers to previous questions with such self-serving, market-oriented commentary as “Producers should know that 98 percent of Screen Guide’s readers follow its authoritative film reviews.” These kinds of contests served the magazine’s marketing and advertising departments as much as they did contest participants. They awarded letter writers with publication or prizes, further solidifying the worth of active participation and affirming the value of being an engaged reader.

In the heyday of the fan magazine, contests were not only frequent but also widely varying in nature: the range included short magazine-authored tests of fans’ knowledge of recent Hollywood happenings such as “Your Gossip Test” in *Motion Picture*, which teases readers with the slogan “Hollywood Knows the Answers to These Questions—Do You?” (14+)¹⁹; studio advertisements in the guise of contests, such as a December 1926 MGM sponsored competition in *Motion Picture Classic*, which promised the female winner of the contest the ring worn by the star of a forthcoming MGM picture, and the male winner the “handsome rapier” John Gilbert used in the same picture if they were able to answer questions about details from recent MGM movies (4); *Photoplay*’s April 1929 “Wanted” contest that promised \$500 to the reader who could come up with a better name for the “talkies” (58); and the February 1928 Universal campaign in *Photoplay* seeking a slogan for “Carl Laemmle’s New Screen Comedy Find: Glenn Tryon” (12). Universal’s not-so-subtle advertisement brags that if you win, “you can then point with pride to your handiwork. You can say, ‘See that Glenn Tryon? He’s a big star—everybody knows him and I did it—I helped make him—he’s a personal friend of

73 cash prizes!



UNIVERSAL
WANTS A
SLOGAN

for

*Carl Laemmle's
New Screen Comedy Find*

GLENN TRYON

Universal Pictures Corporation wants a slogan to be used under my name. A slogan that will typify me.

A catch line that means "me." It must suggest snap, pep, bubbling, sparkling personality. Universal will use it everywhere. If you give Universal a slogan they can use you'll win a cash prize and, furthermore, your slogan will be used in billboards, posters, in national magazines—everywhere! You can then point with pride to your handiwork. You can say, "See that Glenn Tryon? He's a big star—everybody knows him and I did it—I helped to make him—he's a personal friend of mine—he's my boy." Yes, sir—that's the kind of a slogan Universal wants—and you can do it. DO IT! There's money in it for you!

Here are the rules

- 1 Slogans must consist of one sentence—the shorter and snappier the better.
- 2 The slogan must get over to the public the new, unique and different personality of Glenn Tryon.
- 3 The contest opens January 15th and closes April 4th, 1928.
- 4 Contestants are limited to six slogans each.
- 5 In the event of a tie the entire amount of the prize involved will be paid to each contestant.
- 6 This contest is open to every one except employees of the Universal Pictures Corporation.
- 7 No manuscripts will be returned.
- 8 We reserve the right to use any slogan submitted to us whether it wins a prize or not.
- 9 Judges: Carl Laemmle, President of Universal Pictures Corp., and the editors of the leading national film trade papers.

10 Send your slogans to Dept. Ph., Universal Pictures Corp., 730 Fifth Avenue, New York City.

11 Be sure to write your name and address plainly.

73 Cash Prizes

First prize, \$100

Second prize, \$25

Third prize, \$10

Five prizes of \$5 each

Fifty prizes of \$2 each

Fifteen prizes of \$1 each

And here are some pointers on Tryon personality—just to help you originate your slogans

- 1 I'm the phenomenon that comes once in a generation—A NEW AND REFRESHING PERSONALITY!
- 2 I'm a totally new type with dyed-in-the-wool appeal to all AGES, SEXES and CLASSES!
- 3 I combine boyish charm, manly vigor, romance, physical grace and a fascinating, never-forgettable SMILE!
- 4 I'm an athlete and I can dance—how I can DANCE!
- 5 I'm a magician with NEW gags and SURPRISE tricks!
- 6 My comedy is clean, wholesome—and FUNNY!
- 7 Men ADMIRE me—women ADORE me!
- 8 I've got a line that will split your sides with laughter.
- 9 I'm a cave man and I make the girls on and off the screen LOVE IT!
- 10 I'm handsome—I sparkle! I bubble! I scintillate Good Cheer! But, above all, my work is as NEW as a fresh laid egg! I'm clever and I know it—it's a gift!

—Glenn Tryon

UNIVERSAL PICTURES

730 Fifth Ave. (Dept. Ph) New York City

Photo 5: This Universal Pictures cash prize campaign encourages readers to create a slogan for its new star in part by marketing the star under the pretext of helping readers win the prize. The knowledge-plus-activity/creativity formula was fundamental to many aspects of the fan magazines. *Photoplay* Feb. 1928: 12.

mine—he's my boy." This advertisement spells out one version of the logic of fan empowerment that was being relentlessly marketed to readers of this era. The message of reassurance is unmistakable: readers have and should continue to gain information about the films and the stars, and this knowledge has a potential value (in this case \$100 for first prize and the priceless self-satisfaction that comes with it). It also brings us back to the world of advertising, in which knowledge/product is power and is, like the movies and the magazines, worth paying for.

Many contests asked readers to generate ideas—some more elaborate than others—in order to compete for awards. Brewster Publications held a 1925 contest advertised with the following large-type question: "Do you know that YOUR OPINION may be worth THOUSANDS OF DOLLARS???" (129). The contest combined a rhetorical appeal to the magazine readers' sense of their own expertise and a potential reward for sharing their views. Asking contestants to write a 250-word critical essay regarding motion pictures they liked or didn't like, the call for entries used the following logic: "We want you to write about these pictures to us. We want to help you to become CRITICS and to reward those who are most successful." This contest appealed to its readers' sense of their own critical acumen and their desire for self-improvement, dangling the patina of professional development in front of them. The contest rules stipulated that both *Motion Picture* and *Motion Picture Classic* would publish some of the criticisms each month, affording the opportunity for the fan to literally become the critic. Like almost all of the contests, this one also had a rather explicit and self-serving commercial tie-in: the fine print tells potential contestants that Eugene V. Brewster, Editor-in-Chief of Brewster publications, happens to have published a book called "How to Criticize a Picture" that "will be very helpful to you, although it is not necessary for you to have one for the contest."

The degree of effort—writing a 250-word essay instead of just naming a favorite star

or picture—required for this contest was also not unusual. The February 1928 issue of *Photoplay* reports that because of the onslaught of thirty thousand manuscripts received by the magazine for the Photoplay-Paramount-Famous-Lasky Co.'s "\$15,000 Idea Contest," there would be a delay in announcing winners (82). Regardless of whether these figures are accurate or not, the nature of the contest demanded more than just a cut-and-fill-out submission; it required significant creative effort on behalf of contestants. In the January 1933 *Screen Book*, Walt Disney lent an incomplete four-panel cartoon of Mickey Mouse, asking "readers to help them out with ideas" (45). "Mickey offers real cash for the best ending to this cartoon," reads the call, with \$15, \$10, \$5, and \$1 prizes being offered. "All readers of SCREEN BOOK may compete," and the winner's idea would be drawn by Walt Disney himself, to appear in a later *Screen Book* issue. Here the reader was given the opportunity to become a creative partner with one of Hollywood's great talents; this was really a pitch for an audition, not unlike that made by the star search contests that most radically appealed to the transformative fantasies of movie fans.

Indeed, the interactive logic I have been discussing throughout this article is dramatically illustrated by the genre of the star search contest, and I want to segue into my discussion of fan correspondence by briefly addressing the nature of these particular contests. Often originating as beauty contests—and thereby often marking their gendered nature even in their naming—the winners of these typically regional and sometimes national competitions received ample coverage by the local press in addition to fan, industry, and studio publications. *Motion Picture News*, for example, reported in 1920 that Gertrude Olmstead of La Salle, Illinois, won a "beauty contest, held by the Chicago Elks lodge in conjunction with the Chicago Herald and Examiner" that resulted in Carl Laemmle offering her "a place in Universal's galaxy of stars and near stars" (270).²⁰ Most of these contests appear to be thinly disguised promo-

tions for forthcoming films, as in the 1923 “We Have a Part for You In Outlook’s \$250,000 Production ‘Dangerous Love’” contest in *Moving Picture Stories* (29). Readers were directed to put their name and address in the clip-out portion of the contest call: “If you want to get in motion pictures, join our next contest. For full particulars mail this ad in with your name and address written below.” The ad makes itself credible by noting that two former “big motion picture contest” winners—Eugenia Feiner and O. V. Harrison—“were started on Movie careers” by entering into this same process. With the promise of \$100 a week in salary and expenses for the winner, this contest says nothing about looks or talent; the only required asset appears to be having an interest in getting a movie career started. These contests almost always dangled the promise of radical transformation in front of their participants with the allure of easy celebrity gained through an act of submission that would have been familiar to any regular magazine reader.

As I have demonstrated thus far, the fan magazines nurtured readers’ sense of star aspiration and ambition throughout their pages. Even outside of explicit contests, the magazines frequently asked readers to see themselves as potential stars or at least to think about themselves in relation to the stars. “Do You Want to Be a Star?” asked a *New Movie Magazine* self-diagnostic survey from December 1932, followed by a series of questions the readers must ask of themselves in order to determine the answer (31). By consistently placing the reader in the context of star culture through this assortment of activities, the fan magazines sought to train their readers to feel invested—perhaps in every sense of the word—in the culture of Hollywood. James Rorty’s 1930s treatise on advertising argues that “in a business-ruled society, the movie serves the propaganda requirements of business, both as to commerce and politics” (262–63). Although this is, indeed, the case, I want now to turn to at least one way that the movie industry served a more peculiar and personal function in the lives of its most ardent fans.

Dear Clara

I want to conclude this article by turning to some of Clara Bow’s fan letters that have been deposited at the archive of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences.²¹ My aim here is precisely to seek out tangible evidence of how the culture of participation and interaction—a central tenet of the dream being parlayed by Hollywood and its satellite industries—is discernable in the writings of fans to stars. This is, on the one hand, a somewhat speculative venture. For reasons familiar to anyone dealing with fan culture, positing a simple cause and effect relationship (fan magazines made readers do this or that . . .) would seem suspect, at best. However, what I want to demonstrate here is that these letters are consistent with the discourses of ambition, participation, identification, and emulation that are, as I have shown, at the core of the fan magazines. Letters offer us a glimpse into how fans actually acted through a form of expression that went well beyond the commercial paradigms offered in and established by the magazines. Looking to Bow’s (or any star’s) letters is just one method by which we might encounter evidence of fan behaviors and beliefs. These letters are inseparable from the larger idea of fan culture, especially from the fan magazines that taught fans, among other things, that they could profit from speaking directly to the stars.

Bow’s fan mail seems particularly relevant to the concerns of this article because she was herself discovered through a star search contest sponsored by Brewster Publications. Bow would have responded to a version of an advertisement that appeared in *Motion Picture*, which solicited photographs for “The Fame and Fortune Contest of 1921” (122). The advertisement for the contest—along with others like it and with the various modes of address discussed previously in this article—encouraged fans to consider themselves as navigating their own destinies, not unlike the sense given to magazine readers that they might shape the fates of the stars. The contest fostered a notion

of self-empowerment for participants, however unrealistic. Fans would also have been quite familiar with the contest's clip-and-mail entrance conventions had they any prior experience reading the magazines.

After emerging quite literally from the pages of the fan magazines, Bow became one of Hollywood's most visible and controversial stars, receiving especially aggressive coverage in the movie magazines and mainstream press in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Most of the letters in the Bow collection revolve around her film roles during these years, but many also acknowledge that their relationship with and knowledge of Bow was specifically aided by the fan magazines and other print media. From Queensland, Australia, Audrey Ashburu wrote, "I remember when you won a Beauty Contest some years ago, & I still have the picture framed, as you looked like a little fairy thing . . . I read, with great interest, your doings in Hollywood, in the 'Classic', & I have a book of stories & pictures of you" (1926 folder). Ashburu's personal attention to the trajectory of Bow's career in the pages of the fan magazine affirms her status as a kind of ideal fan/reader: she followed Bow from contest to celebrity, thereby witnessing the transformative value of the fan magazines. She also kept and bought things pertaining to the star along the way, supporting the ideological and material cycle of the Hollywood star from the other side of the globe. Similarly, Miss Edna Dolores McGloin of Brooklyn, New York (Bow was herself from New York), proclaimed, "I have not missed any of the press reports about you for the sake of my idolatry" (1931 folder). Although not specifying the movie magazines as her source, it is likely that any ardent fan would have—like Audrey Ashburu—turned to the most reliable source for information concerning her favorite star. As Marjorie L. Derr from Sacramento, California, reported, "Down here at the Motor Vehicle—you are a favorite with all—young and old. We read all the reviews of your pictures—and never miss a movie magazine that contains a write-up about you" (1931 folder).

What immediately becomes apparent when reading these letters is that these authors are all trying to establish themselves as authorities on the subject of Clara Bow to Bow herself. This parading of knowledge is analogous to what the fan magazines were training their readers to do: to read the magazines and then to demonstrate their knowledge through quizzes, contests, and letters. By citing their reading habits, collections, and conversations, these fans sought to impress Bow with their mastery of her as a celebrity and, often more importantly, as the person behind the media representation. This also accounts for the peculiar familiarity with which many of these writers approach the actress. In addition to what might be the expected requests for photographs, autographs, and personal appearances, the letters written to Bow demonstrate a curious mixture of respectful admiration and brazen familiarity. Some fans seem aware of the likely impersonal handling of fan mail but still hope that their letters might somehow make it to Bow. "If this letter gets by your Secretary," wrote Mac Smith from Knoxville, Tennessee, "I would very much appreciate a little line, telling something of your pictures, and a small photograph" (1926 folder). This fantasy of exceptionalism—that this letter writer might be the chosen one to be rewarded with special attention—is not unique; numerous other writers articulate their hopes that Bow will choose them to endow with special favors.

Dina Martin from Cicero, Illinois, attempted to achieve this very aim on the occasion of Bow's birthday, sending her a letter accompanied by "a little gift, a rose and handkerchief [sic]" (1931 folder). In addition to asking for Bow to send her a photo and autograph, Martin explained, "I often write to you and always pray to God that you will answer my letters. I know that millions of people write to you . . . but if you consider me a friend . . . in your spare time write to me." Although Martin, like Smith, seemed totally aware of the daunting volume of Bow's fan mail, she still held out hope for "winning the prize" of Bow's personal attention in a fashion reminiscent of the logic of all of the

letter-writing and contest opportunities in the fan magazines. Martin even provided instructions to Bow regarding how she would like her photograph autographed: “just like this: To my friend, Dina. Clara.” Martin proactively attempted to control her interactions with the star by scripting Bow’s response to her, exercising a belief that fans have some degree of power over what the stars do and recalling the numerous ways that the fan magazines had fostered this same notion.

Others wrote to Bow as if she were a relative or friend whose casual, conversation-like response was fully expected: “Do you enjoy making pictures? Did you like ‘Mantrap?’” (Frances Summer, 1926 folder). On behalf of the Sigma Nu Fraternity in Corvallis, Oregon, Stanford C. Biden Jr. wrote what he called “more than a fan letter. This is an invitation from fifty young college men, ardent admirers of yourself, to our Spring formal” (1929 folder). Citing reports that Bow had made appearances like this before as favors to her fans, Biden displayed an awareness of Bow’s extra-cinematic activities that derived from the kind of information disseminated by studio publicity departments. The hope that one might write a letter and receive something in return seems at once entirely unrealistic and yet also in keeping with the interactively oriented training provided by the movie magazines.

Even those correspondents who profess reluctance or feel a certain impropriety in their acts of writing often express an unusual sense of familiarity with the star. Cecilia Radnovich confessed to having never thought about writing to someone she did not know, but after “reading reports about your health and just now your decision to leave the movies, it seemed as if I knew you real well. It sort of seemed as if a real friend of mine, and not a movie star far beyond my reach, was lying sick and probably tired of the whole mess” (1931 folder). Radnovich’s awareness of her own complex identification with Bow—both a stranger and someone familiar to her, both a movie star and a friend—suggests that fans were frequently rebelling against realistic judgments

about social behavior in their correspondence with celebrities. After expressing these hesitations, Radnovich, in fact, went on to suggest that Bow go to a little place in Canada that Radnovich went for her vacation last year, asserting that “Gosh, after a summer there, you’d be ready to lick the world.” Here is the fan giving the star unsolicited advice (think of the myriad advice columns in the movie magazines), a veritable trope in the letters to Bow.

After apologizing for the “impertinence in writing to you at your home,” Marian J. Clarke from Middletown, Connecticut, advised Bow to take “a dramatic role” (1931 folder). If the fan magazines trained readers to confront their problems by either asking for or giving advice, then we certainly witness here consistent evidence that this same thinking exists in the writings of the majority of Bow’s fans. In addition to this managerial advice, Clarke also referred to a rather fascinating reversal of convention in a postscript that is reminiscent of the kind of self-presentational behavior encouraged by the fan magazines: “Here’s a snapshot of me (just so that you’ll know what I look like).” To revise the anonymity of the fan–star relationship, Clarke literally reversed the direction of the conventional star–fan photographic exchange. Clarke was not inventing the nature of this exchange, just changing the rules of how the game was played to suit her own conceptualization of the star–fan relationship.

The training received by readers of fan magazines to offer their opinions and advice certainly appears to be reflected in the comments made by many of Bow’s correspondents. “Just think of the long span of years you have ahead of you,” wrote Connie Romero from Los Angeles, California. “Goodness, I hope you don’t get married and retire. If you marry please don’t desert us, you will disappoint all your fans” (Connie Romero, 1926 folder). Other fans recommend that Bow have a look at stories recently published in magazines as potential source material for future films (Eva Harvey, 1926 folder), attempting the kind of creative intervention we know magazine readers were

encouraged to make on a regular basis. Still others listed some of the films they had recently watched and enjoyed, sharing their tastes with their favorite star (Emily Kramer, 1926 folder). All of these epistolary comments attempted to bridge that gap between fan and star, continuing the intimacy-building project of the fan magazines. Asking for favors, sharing ideas, and offering advice were all iterations of the discourse established and enabled by the movie magazines.

But this did not stop at the level of informational interaction. Perhaps the most fascinating letters expressed an even more aggressive identification with Bow, an emulation of her as a person and as a star and even the desire to dramatically close the gap between fan and star. For example, Miss Edna Dolores McGloin compared her own personal difficulties to the recent troubles plaguing Bow, which had been widely reported in the press. Not only did McGloin report that her old boss used to call her Clara Bow (“I have red hair and used to have rather nonchalant ways”), but she insisted that “if you will pardon me . . . I can truly feel with you about it” (1931 folder). This reaction is rather zealous, to the point that McGloin expressed a twinning of experience with her much-admired Hollywood counterpart. But this kind of vehement identification was merely an outgrowth of the imaginary relationships fostered by the fan magazines, which encouraged fans to establish empathetic relationships to the stars. Marjorie Derr wrote, “We all sympathised with you in that DeVoe trial—and would have loved to inject some rat poison [sic] in a few reporter’s systems” (1931 folder), a sentiment echoed in a number of other letters. This desire to intervene, however rhetorical or hyperbolic, suggests an attempt to transcend the truly imaginary relationship that existed between fan and star. This sentiment, in fact, seems to have appealed to Bow, given the fact that these are among the letters she chose to hold on to.

Many of the letters Bow saved expressed sympathy for the star’s plight in the wake of the scandals that plagued her and that resulted in

the end of her contract with Paramount. After noting that she had just “finished reading the 1st installment of Louella Parsons’ interview about you in the paper,” seventeen-year-old Luella Davis from Council Bluffs, Iowa, proposed that as soon as Bow was well enough to leave the sanitarium, she should disguise herself (“as an old widow”) and come to Iowa, so that when Davis turns eighteen (in January 1932), they “can start out together, hike, travel etc until you fully gain back your health” (1931 folder). Of the letters Bow saved, this is certainly the most ambitious and perhaps also the most delusional, seeming itself a bit like a movie plot. Telling Bow that all she needed to be happy was “a little home, no matter how humble, a good husband and a baby,” Davis also advised that Bow should “come down on the level with the rest of the world, mix with good honest clean people and you will find happiness.” Davis concluded her letter with a postscript indicating the sincerity of her offer: “If you happen to answer this letter please make the envelope look like an advertisement so that my parents won’t read it and sign your name as Pauline Bowers. (Bow)ers—see?”

Although Davis’s letter certainly testifies to her own degree of eccentric fanaticism, we might best understand it as simply occupying a place on the spectrum of interactive fan reaction that was being schooled in the fan magazines. Eric Smoodin, examining the fan mail sent to Frank Capra, notes that he is “studying cinema at the point of consumption” in a fashion that reflects the “interactive nature of film production and film viewing” (127–28). Indeed, making fans believe that what they said and did mattered was a necessary precondition for a marketplace in which the primary products were as intangible as the movies and the stars who populated them. If the movie magazines seemed to collectively teach fans to think and to behave in certain ways, it was only because this mode of discourse proved economically effective for the industry as a whole. One unnamed fan from Chicago, Illinois, concluded his or her letter to Bow with a postscript that sums

up the fantasy being peddled by Hollywood: "P.S. I'll be a movie star myself. I feel that my big chance is coming soon. I will let you [know] who I am when I come to Hollywood" (1931 folder; June 9, 1931). This fan may, like Davis, exist at the extreme of the spectrum of fan behavior, but all evidence suggests that his or her goal was no different from what we have seen throughout this essay: to achieve some form of recognition from an industry that invited such behavior and to play the game.

NOTES

A preliminary version of this article was presented at the 2004 Women and the Silent Screen Congress in Montreal, Canada. Many thanks for assistance with my research are due to Barbara Hall at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences and to Rosemary Hanes and Madeline Matz in the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound Division at the Library of Congress. I am grateful to the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at North Carolina State University for awarding me a Faculty Research and Professional Development research grant, which allowed me to purchase a number of the magazines with which I have worked in the preceding pages.

1. The quote is from Herbert Howe, "New Stars for Old," *Picture Play* Nov. 1919: 27.

2. In *At the Picture Show*, Kathryn Fuller demonstrates that "Nickelodeon-era movie fandom, at least as it was depicted in *M[otion] P[icture] S[tory] M[agazine]* during its earliest years of publication, was both sexually undifferentiated and geographically diverse" (142). As Fuller and others have pointed out, the magazines—in terms of both advertising and content—became more clearly targeted at female readers starting in the mid-1910s and by the 1920s were directed at a primarily female audience. In his 1934 book about advertising, James Rorty addresses the female readership of the fan magazines and also observes that "the dozen or so popular movie magazines whose combined circulation of over 3,000,000 ranks next in volume to that of the women's magazines" (252). See also Gaylyn Studlar, "The Perils of Pleasure?"; Janet Staiger, "Announcing Wares, Winning Patrons, Voicing Ideals"; Adrienne McLean, "New Films in Story Form"; Miriam Hansen, "Adventures of Goldilocks"; Jeanne Allen, "The Film Viewer as Consumer"; and Kathryn Fuller, "*Motion Picture Story Magazine* and the Gendered Construction of the Movie Fan." There also exists a significant literature on non-film periodicals targeted particularly at women during the nineteenth and twentieth centu-

ries, much of which is relevant to the subject at hand. See, for example, Ellen Gruber Garvey, *The Adman in the Parlor*; Helen Damon-Moore, *Magazines for the Millions*; and Jennifer Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings*. In "Disseminations of Modernity" Alexandra Keller makes a compelling case for the ways that catalogues have a kinship to the cinema as symbols of modernity.

3. Unlike the fan letters published in the magazines—which, as Kathryn Fuller points out in *At the Picture Show*, have been questioned by film historians in terms of their authenticity and their accuracy as reflections of the magazines' readership (153)—fan mail seems less likely to be forged or otherwise manipulated. Of course, surviving fan mail raises other questions—for example, why certain letters were kept, saved, shared, or deposited at an archive while others were not. These questions have rarely been addressed in the scholarship given that fan mail remains a largely neglected element of celebrity and fan history. An important exception to this can be found in Eric Smoodin, "This Business of America."

4. Morey also briefly notes that participation was an important characteristic of the fan magazine, as does Kathryn Fuller in "*Motion Picture Story Magazine* and the Gendered Construction of the Movie Fan." Fuller especially discusses the evolution of the pioneering "Answers to Inquiries" column that began in *Motion Picture Story Magazine's* August 1911 issue (102–03).

5. My use of the word "actors" here is not meant to suggest that fans were encouraged to become literal actors, although the contests would support this supposition. Rather, fans were encouraged to be active participants in the culture of the motion picture industry by doing such things as engaging with Hollywood stars and stories, buying movie tickets and related products, emulating the stars, and so on.

6. See, for example, "The Answer Man," *Motion Picture* June 1925: 84+. Fuller notes that the "Answer Man" debuted in *Motion Picture Story Magazine* in August 1911 (*Picture Show* 138).

7. A number of film historians make this point about the "ground swell of public interest in the movie actors [which] began to appear in letters to the moving-picture studios and trade periodicals and in the daily conversations a good theater manager had with his customers" (Bowser 107).

8. For example, see "Their Studio Addresses," *Modern Screen* Jan. 1935: 13+. Readers were directed to write to the performers—both those under contract and those who were "free lance"—at Columbia, Fox, Samuel Goldwyn, Mascot, MGM, Monogram, Paramount, RKO-Radio, Twentieth Century, United Artists, Universal, and Warner Bros.-First National. *Motion Picture* published a "What the Stars Are Doing and Where They May Be Found" column, with an alphabetical list of stars that notes the picture currently being

made and studio address so that fans could write “letters for your favorites.” See, for example, *Motion Picture* Oct. 1932: 10.

9. For example, “Questions & Answers,” *Photoplay* Apr. 1929: 91+. This column includes a note, in bold, alerting readers that “many of the studios now have made a positive ruling not to send out photographs unless money is enclosed to pay for the picture and cost of mailing.” It seems likely that this statement reflects an overwhelmingly high demand for photographic star material.

10. See, for example, “Brickbats and Bouquets,” *Photoplay* Apr. 1929: 10. *Motion Picture Classic* had a similar version of this epistolary arrangement, rewarding readers with money (\$15, \$10, \$5, and \$1) for “their impressions of the pictures and players.” *Motion Picture Classic* Dec. 1926: 6. *Screenland*’s comparable column, “Salutes and Snubs,” paid \$5.00 each to the top eight letters of the month. See, for example, *Screenland* Aug. 1935: 58. *Motion Picture* awarded \$20, \$10, and \$5 prizes for “the Three Best letters of the month.” Their slogan: “Write ‘Em and Reap A Money Prize.” See, for example, “Letters from Our Readers,” *Motion Picture* Oct. 1932: 6. *Movie Mirror* endowed \$20, \$10, and five \$1 prizes for letters each week in their “Speak for Yourself” column. See, for example, “Speak for Yourself,” *Movie Mirror* Oct. 1937: 4.

11. Although dating the first star-election contest is difficult, Q. David Bowers claims that *Ladies’ World* sponsored a “Moving Picture Contest” in which postcards emblazoned with star images were used to solicit votes from subscribers. He does not date this contest, but the postcard he reproduces is of King Baggot, making it likely that this contest would have dated to the 1910s. The postcard, with an image of Baggot on one side and a reproduced note—complete with Baggot’s autograph—on the other, reads, “Dear Friend: In The Ladies’ World of this month you will find that I am a contestant in their great Moving Picture Contest. Will you vote for me? Many of your friends have” (39–45).

12. Although it is beyond the scope of my discussion here, another form of this was the pastime of scenario-writing, which, Kathryn Fuller has suggested, “reached the level of a national passion during the 1910s” and was a “viable alternative for audience participation in the movie industry” (“Boundaries of Participation” 80).

13. A similar campaign was waged by the Perfect Voice Institute, whose clip-and-mail “free and without any obligation” advertisement for Professor Feuchtinger’s book, *Physical Voice Culture*, reads, “You, Too, Can Realize Your Dreams By Developing a Strong Rich Voice” (3).

14. For more on star endorsements and advertising, see Jane Gaines, “From Elephants to LUX Soap,” 29–43.

15. This particular issue of *Photoplay* contains a good deal of advertising seemingly aimed at male readers. This is a segment of the fan magazine audience that deserves more scholarly attention, given that women have been presumed the primary target of these magazines.

16. In reference to women’s magazines such as *Ladies’ Home Journal*, Jennifer Scanlon notes that advertisers often used strategies that blurred the lines between their campaigns and those employed by the magazines in advice columns, editorial material, and fiction (170).

17. The same issue also advertised “Screen Book’s Hollywood Pattern Service,” allowing readers to clip a coupon and buy a pattern for “the most attractive dress in Movieland for you to copy” (49).

18. The June 1925 issue of *Motion Picture* contains a nostalgic look back at their June 1915 issue, in which their “Great Cast Contest” found Francis X. Bushman as the “Leading Man” with 609,905 votes and Mary Pickford as the “Leading Woman” with 580,750 votes. “Clippings from the Motion Picture Magazine of June, 1915” (8).

19. Another version of this is the “How Well Do You Know Your Hollywood” contest in *Photoplay*, a multiple-choice exam with answers on another page of the same issue that resulted in a grading of one’s knowledge; grades ranged from not keeping up to knowing “as much as *Photoplay*” (8).

20. According to Anthony Slide, Olmstead went on to have a fairly successful career working in films alongside Lon Chaney, Tom Mix, and Rudolph Valentino until her retirement in 1929.

21. The one hundred or so letters in the AMPAS Clara Bow Collection (filed by year under Fan Mail) are those that Bow selected to pass on to her children. They are enclosed in an envelope with Bow’s handwritten note on the outside: “To Tony and George. Fan mail—1931, after De Voe trial, earlier fan mail—1926, 1927—etc. also 1950—Just a few saved for my sons, Tony and George, out of the millions I received during and after my motion picture career—Mom.” It is impossible to know how these letters were similar to or different from the vast numbers of other letters received by Bow. When citing from these letters, I identify the folder by year and the author of the letter to the best of my ability (the handwriting is often difficult to decipher); the letters are not individually catalogued.

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