

Book Review: the French screen goddess: film stardom and the modern woman in 1930s France by Jonathan Driskell

RODGERS, Diane <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3117-4308>>

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Published version

RODGERS, Diane (2015). Book Review: the French screen goddess: film stardom and the modern woman in 1930s France by Jonathan Driskell. *Cinema Retro*, 11 (33), p. 44.

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THE FRENCH SCREEN GODDESS: FILM STARDOM AND THE MODERN WOMAN IN 1930s FRANCE
By Jonathan Driskell (I.B. Tauris, £58/ \$94) 240 pages. Hardback. ISBN: 9781780767000

Studies of French 1930s cinema, more often than not, focus on political agendas of the time, or more particularly, 'masterpiece' films from auteur directors such as Renoir and Vigo. Whilst these works are certainly deserved of study and acclaim, there are a number of significant perspectives which have tended to be overlooked in terms of cinema engaging with popular culture, stardom and, in particular, female cinematic stardom of the day.

With strong academic credentials, drawing from key texts and theorists (including Richard Dyer's seminal work on stars and a significant body of writing by Ginette Vincendeau), and plenty of impressive empirical research, Jonathan Driskell's book brings a fresh perspective to a key historical era of cinema.

Using three female stars (Annabella, Danielle Darrieux and Michèle Morgan) as specific case studies to focus on, Driskell tackles the question of French cinematic stardom, how it uniquely differs to that of the stage or of Hollywood, and what these particular stars bring to French cinema themselves, beyond the auteur director's input. Concentration on female stars allows for a fascinating consideration of gender in cinema and repercussions of characterisation in a wider social and political context - in a country where women didn't even have the right to vote until 1944 - two or three decades after many neighbouring European counterparts!

The changing notion of the French 'modern woman' throughout the decade is discussed, understood at the time more through fashion and consumption than overt gender politics. Simple actions such as wearing trousers, driving cars and smoking cigarettes could illustrate a new rebellious, independent, spirit in themselves and, becoming visible in French cinema at this time thus helped pave the way for more general societal change.

Hollywood cinema and concepts of stardom are useful counterpoint references here to those less familiar with the French stars and perhaps a number of the films under discussion. In fact, the stars here have been chosen specifically because they are the less famous, or less written-about, actors of the period but, as Driskell argues, no less important than more well-known names (like Arletty) and comparisons to Hollywood counterparts, such as Garbo, Harlow and Crawford, help contextualise the discussion.

There is a fascinating overview of the changing perceptions of beauty as imposed by magazine culture, driven by fandom, and the extent to which French cinematic stardom relied upon, or certainly stemmed from, image and the pursuit of photogénie (or photogenic beauty) and the idea of pure cinema. A new type of French cinema was being developed by artistic directors and auteurs who were looking to move away from theatrical traditions and create something new and purely cinematic; something more impressionistic, nuanced and artful. The stars

under discussion complemented this new type of approach - their image was significant, but also a lower-key style of acting, less grandly theatrical and more subtly captured in close ups and the medium of film itself; editing and lighting playing bigger roles rather than the more traditional sense of filming a staged piece.

Varying types of the modern woman are dealt with here - from a non-threatening, glamorous, nostalgic femininity through to more unruly, comedic and irreverent portrayals, challenging the status quo with varying degrees. Throughout, however, Driskell maintains a sense of how cinematic stardom became a unique phenomenon in terms of female stars; there is a constant theme of the ordinary alongside the extraordinary, humble shopgirl alongside 'modern gal' lawyer - there is something mysterious, romantic and glamorous, yet attainable and identifiable in almost all characters these stars portrayed. Audience connection with the stars in question is central to this discussion; ordinary movie-goers of the day could relate to the characters - the way in which some of the stars were 'discovered' (sunbathing on a beach, or via family photograph) suggests almost anyone could find themselves in the same position and thus identify and aspire to a similar status. Any ordinary French girl could therefore imagine themselves one day famous, marrying a Hollywood movie star (as Annabella, often portraying a humble 'midinette' shopgirl indeed later married Tyrone Power in real life). However, the lack of immediate physical presence (as there would have been in the theatre) of the stars still allowed for an elevated, mystique of cinematic stardom and fascination.

This 'mystery' quality of stars is discussed in some depth; Driskell challenges Colin Crisp's assertion that star quality necessitates mystery (he gives the example of James Cagney as a star persona based on 'ordinariness' or lack of mystique). Danielle Darrieux is discussed in terms of her screwball comedy persona and fresh representation of a modern woman in androgynous clothing, maintaining a distinct cinematic glamour, likened to Katharine Hepburn; with integrity and authority rather than total subservience in her characterisations.

Conflicting attitudes of the period are shown in the variety of portrayals across the stars' careers; although politics isn't at the forefront here, the impact and relevance of the rise and fall of the Popular Front isn't overlooked. Economic depression, political change, riots and strikes; a shift from right to left and back again, all take their place in affecting the cinema's representation of gender in terms of social change. Hints are made at progression for women in places - the period saw rebellious female characters, women taking on traditional male roles (e.g. Darrieux's casting as a lawyer) and girls dominating their male counterparts at times. However, more often than not, as Driskell points out, female characters ultimately are seen to conform, or often 'put in their place' (capitulating to romance, marriage or motherhood) by ideologically conflicted films; the women disadvantaged by social conditions usually in favour of men.

Driskell looks at the shift in progression of female representations across the decade, Michèle Morgan taking up the baton towards the end of the period under discussion, with notable links to what would be another significant period in female French stardom - in the New Wave of the 1960s (Morgan was discovered by Marc Allegret, the same scout as would later 'discover' Brigitte Bardot, for example).

Consideration of Morgan's career allows for another perspective of gender representation as she was so often coupled with Jean Gabin, the biggest male star of the day, but on surprisingly equal terms. Known as the most famous and convincing screen couple of French cinema, Morgan was depicted as Gabin's double; a mirror to him rather than his opposite - his vulnerability and her tomboyish traits allowed to complement one another.

Overall, Driskell's argument of the collective significance of these stars and the representations of the modern 1930s French woman is a convincing one. His outline of French cinematic stardom as opposed to that of the theatre or Hollywood is clear and distinct. It is easy to get the sense that Driskell is enamoured with his chosen leading ladies - there is heavy emphasis on the discussion of ethereal and timeless beauty; their classic, stylish elegance - there is minimal detail in the way of biographical detail of the actors' lives at a personal or anecdotal level. This would simply be diverting from the central discussion, however, as it is the idea and representation of persona that is important here - stardom itself in terms of images and iconography as created and perpetuated onscreen. The star as represented by the filmmakers and perceived by an audience rather than the 'real person' is the main agenda in these terms.

For such detailed discussion of the importance of image and spectacle, central throughout the book and to the overall argument, a few more illustrative images would have been useful and interesting in places. Nonetheless, Driskell's description of a specific type and representation of 1930s woman - slim, tall, intelligent and romantic with an ordinary and yet extraordinary beauty; cars, cigarettes and Chanel clothing - albeit a nuanced and shifting image over the period - does reinforce a specifically French notion of 1930s glamour and stardom, the

iconography and notion of French chic that would come to be adopted by Hollywood and much of the Western world.

A refreshing perspective on an area of cinema more traditionally focussed on in terms of the directors and their 'masterpieces' or political perspectives, this book may well fuel a desire to return to some of those masterpieces with an altered perspective, or hopefully discover a few lesser known hidden gems to boot!