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Rachel Moseley (ed.): Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity

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Rachel Moseley (ed.): Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity

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“Kleider machen Leute,” Gottfried Keller famously opined in 1874. But they may be responsible for much more, as Rachel Moseley tries to demonstrate in *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity*. This collection of essays “represents an attempt to further carve out in the field of film studies an interdisciplinary niche which looks at the significant role played by clothes in constructing and inflecting star images, and in producing meaning as a significant element of the total signifying system of the cinema” (p.2). Moseley selects six essays to cover Hollywood and another seven to cover Asia, Latin America, and Europe, with at least one (but usually more) black-and-white stills from each of the motion pictures or stars examined. The methodological approaches involve close textual analyses of the films, assisted by cultural studies, reception theory, and psychoanalysis, which sometimes strays into borderline star gossip (as when we learn about the dichotomy between Doris Day’s “enormous bust” [p.59] and its consistently more modest filmic depictions).

Jane Marie Gaines and Charlotte Cornelia Herzog examine the intersection of art and life in the career of Norma Shearer, who played both Marie Antoinette in the eponymous film by W.S. van Dyke (1938) and "Queen of the Lot" as wife of MGM studio head Irving Thalberg. The authors argue that the representation of historical and cinematic excesses converged in famous images of an overly-costumed and -coiffed Shearer. Drake Stutesman traces what he believes to be counter-narratives in the films of Marlene Dietrich as told through the device of her various hats, cultural markers "as no other article of dress . . . combining signifier and signified as few objects do" (p.30). Along the way he also relates the story of Dietrich's milliner, John Frederics (born Hans Harburger), and of his lifelong professional relationship with the German star. Pamela Church Gibson sees in *Ocean's Eleven* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) "a seminal text and perfect model of current codes of costuming in contemporary Hollywood" (p.63), focusing her analysis upon the 'rough' look of the young Brad Pitt and the 'smooth' one of the older George Clooney. (While the villain of the piece, Andy Garcia's Terry Benedict, receives insightful treatment, *Ocean's* other ten, as exotically dressed as some of them are, receive shorter shrift.) From the other side of the world, Kaushik Bhaumik uncovers the tension between traditional, upper-class-backed feminine values and the images of women in early Indian cinema, especially those of versatile star Ruby Myers, otherwise known as Sulochana. Pam Cook and Claire Hines seek an answer for the perennial question as to why Sean Connery makes the "perfect, the quintessential James Bond" (p.147). They contend that the Scottish star embodied a felicitous mix of mutually contradictory qualities; unquestionable patriotic allegiance and rebellious tendencies, Establishment connections and rugged heterosexuality that almost seems to burst from his iconic suits. The authors contextualize the Bond character within the changing mores of a sixties culture that also saw the increasing popularity of *Playboy*:

The book's provenance is broad, perhaps too much so. Besides those in the articles described above, the films and stars examined span from Doris Day and *Pillow Talk* (Michael Gordon, 1959) to Argentine actress Luisina Brando and *El año de conejo/Year of the Rabbit* (María Luisa Bemberg, 1987). While such eclectic coverage means that there is probably something for everyone (except, perhaps, for science fiction and western fans), restriction to a particular era or genre or national cinema might have resulted in a more coordinated ensemble. Still, the overall quality of the essays and an extensive bibliography make this volume worthwhile reading for anyone interested in a too-long neglected aspect of cinematic history.

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