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# Modernity, femininity and Hollywood fashions: Women's cinephilia in 1930s French fan magazines

## ABSTRACT

*My broad aim in this article is to explore the reception of Hollywood fashions in French mass circulation film magazines of the 1930s as it intersects with specific ideals of modernity, femininity and national identity. These magazines allow for a case study exploring the nexus between the global and the local in the construction of particular models of modern femininity in consumer culture. I want to suggest that these publications offered a key site for French women's negotiation of modernity and were a key locus of a popular, feminine cinephilia neglected in existing accounts of cinephilia.*

## KEYWORDS

1930s France  
film magazines  
popular cinephilia  
Hollywood  
star fashions  
femininity  
modernity  
consumer culture

## INTRODUCTION

Hollywood is our Mecca, our Bayreuth [...] the capital of mechanical art.  
(Chantal 1933 in Chantal 1977: 131)

I only read the entertainment section of newspapers. I live life through its reflection on the screen.

(Chantal 1936 in Chantal 1977: 243)

In the introduction to a collection of essays on cinephilia, the editors Marijke de Valk and Malte Hagener note how the term has been appropriated for dogmatic agendas and conceptualize cinephilia 'as an umbrella term for a number of different affective engagements with the moving image' (2005: 1). With few exceptions (Sellier 2010; Jullier and Leveratto 2010), almost all the work on French cinephilia has focused exclusively on the film culture of the 1950s and its masculine ethics. Symptomatically, this dominant discourse has tended to marginalize women, whether as producers or consumers. Consequently, although cinema has depended on female audiences, as the modernist ethic was elevated to canonical status, their contributions, when they are not silenced, are still undervalued or dismissed. This discussion is part of an attempt to account for the marginalized history of popular, feminine cinephilia neglected in existing accounts of French film culture. In her study of the relation between fashion, Hollywood cinema, femininity and stardom in the 1930s, Sarah Berry sees fashion as 'an aspect of women's negotiation of modernity and post-traditional identity' (2000: xii–xiii). By analysing the discourse of femininity and Hollywood star fashions offered by mass circulation French film magazines of the mid-1930s, I would like to explore how the cultural and ideological construction of femininity in popular film magazines served as a site for women's negotiation of modernity. My analysis is based on a sample from *Cinémonde* (1928–1971), *Ciné-Miroir* (1922–1953) and *Pour Vous* (1928–1940), three mass circulation film magazines that were archetypal of committed mass cinephilia and whose main appeal, like their UK and US versions, was to women. Given the traditional association of fashion, clothing and cosmetics with feminine culture and the centrality of cinema in fashioning national identity, I wish to suggest that within the formative public dimension of 1930s film culture, these film journals offered female audiences a key site for negotiating what Miriam Hansen has called 'the gendered itineraries of everyday life and leisure' (1991: 2).

## THE OTHER CINEPHILIA

French film historiography has not been particularly interested in cinema as a popular entertainment form and social practice. Little research has been done in the area of popular French film magazines, despite the fact that over one hundred journals in this genre appeared in France between the 1920s and the early 1960s (Crisp 1997: 221). Because they addressed a committed mass audience, these magazines, if they are mentioned at all, have been condemned as popular, escapist or capitalist indoctrination aimed at a debased female readership of *midinettes* (little shop girls). In their contested position as popular and lowbrow, these magazines can be seen to mirror the central debates around modernism and mass culture, namely, the way in which consumption has been bound up with pejorative notions of the feminine as subjective, emotional and passive, as modernism's Other (Huysen 1986; Nava 1996). It is indeed significant that histories of French film culture have reflected these gendered battles lines (between women as passive consumers and men as active producers). It is therefore not surprising, in the wider context of a dominant French cultural tradition that has opposed a feminized mass culture against masculine modernism and high cultural aesthetics, to find a discursive marginalization

of popular film magazines and their readers and in particular a denial of a gendered experience of modernity through cinema and of the status of popular cinephilia. The limited scholarly work on mass circulation magazines thus also reflects the association of mass circulation magazines with entertainment and popular culture. Yet, passionate audience responses to the cinema were as much a part of mass circulation magazines as the more canonical modernist publications. Indeed, while it is well known that the early years of the industrialization of cinema in France witnessed its intellectual appropriation as an art, French film culture of the inter-war period was also marked by a widespread, committed 'popular cinephilia with a concomitant encyclopaedic familiarity and knowledge of film and its pleasures (Bosseno 2002: 184).

Colin Crisp, in his revisionist study of French cinema in the 1930s, is one of the rare scholars to have engaged with the formation of audiences through mass circulation publications. Indeed, Crisp notes that their discourse of pleasure and entertainment around stars was also present in the legendary cinephile journal *La Revue du cinéma* and that its hagiographic eulogies of American stars were also prominent in early issues of the modernist *Cahiers du Cinéma* (1997: 219). Nevertheless, in his more recent overview of the representation of actors and actresses through popular film magazines between 1930 and 1940 and what he calls their discourse of 'frilly' and 'vacuous' femininity, Crisp does not discuss why the representation of women and their increasing association with consumption and appearance became prominent at this particular historical juncture (2002: 264–65).

Feminist film theorists have argued that in the 1920s 'the genealogy of the female film spectator is founded on the interpenetration of consumer and cultural practices in modernity' (Maule and Russell 2005: 52). Women's relations to the cinema, Maule and Russell have observed, 'are inevitably articulated within the terms of social conventions and gender roles' (2005: 53). Thus, in contrast with the social identity of self-creation and parthenogenesis that became a constitutive element of modernist cinephilia, Rosanna Maule and Catherine Russell have described women's experience of the cinema as 'an other cinephilia', one that is 'embedded in the activities of everyday life and in this sense is quite unlike the transcendent quasi-religious worship of cinema that the term came to designate in the post-war period' (2005: 54). Paula Amad has also challenged the masculine, individual, elitist and fetishist underpinnings of the cinephile strain in French film criticism in her discussion of Eve Francis, a figure that was recouped for a masculinist conception of cinephilia and relegated to a silent role as Louis Delluc's muse (Rabinovitz 2006: 42), despite the fact that she has helped establish the 1920s French avant-garde's passion for cinema while also defining cinephilia in relation to a gendered experience of modernity. From this perspective, then, 'women's passionate viewing experiences enable us to rethink the history of cinephilia as one that includes a range of specific viewing practices, pleasures and objects of devotion. It is not an essentialist 'feminine' or even 'feminist' experience that is described here, but a more embodied, living apprehension of the cinematic experience' (Maule and Russell 2005: 54).

## **HOLLYWOOD FASHIONS AND MODERNITY**

The 1930s is considered the golden age of French cinema as a spectacle and mass entertainment medium, supplanting the theatre and the music hall and offering the most popular form of culture. This decade also represents a golden

age of the popular film press, providing the primary forum for discussion about the cinema (Abel 1988: 5). Mass circulation magazines were sites where cultural meanings were produced and consumed, where local and global, national and international film cultures were engaged with and discussed. As Christophe Gauthier has noted, they 'constituted a site of mediation between an elitist conception of art and the wider field of leisure' (2003: 11).

Although reliable statistics about the actual composition of the audience are not available, mass circulation reviews had a special appeal in the constitution of new female publics, promoting 'a local version of lifestyle feminism, declaring the self-assertiveness, sport-mindedness and lack of inhibitions of Hollywood stars worthy of emulation', with some, such as *Cinémonde*, under the editorship of Suzanne Chantal, strongly backing the vote for women (De Grazia 2005: 452). French popular magazines tapped into feminine interests with beauty and fashion features. The content of these sections was geared towards topics considered to be of interest to women, from fashion and make-up to cooking, health, leisure, motherhood, feminism and women's suffrage. The most famous of these women's pages was the stars' advice column on beauty and fashion. In addition, beauty contests, 'although never so widespread as in the United States had become an institution by the mid-1930s as had the fan club. Its intent, aside from promoting the sponsors and avowedly recruiting fresh local talent for the industry was to domesticate the new beauty standards, sexual mores and social habits fostered by American films (De Grazia 1989: 53–87, 70).

Reviews from the 1930s need to be read against the background of a burgeoning consumer culture as well as alongside a broader strand of women's increasing visibility through access to education, public leisure, work and money, even though French women were excluded from suffrage until the post-war period. The fan magazines' popularity in the 1930s took place within an ideological framework marked by women's growing visibility in the social sphere and a popular discourse that placed the realm of gender at the forefront of cultural concerns about French national identity. Following the devastation of World War I, the post-war crisis affecting European society and culture as a whole, the Depression in 1934 and the low birth rate, observers were concerned about the decline of France as a world power 'eclipsed by America in the international arena', an America equated with modern, mass society (Peer 1998: 15–16). France's 'entry into – and taming of – modernity', according to Peer, was negotiated through a process that strove to 'domesticate the forms of modernisation [...] adapting new innovations to existing cultural and social arrangements' (1998: 8, 144). Mary Louise Roberts has shown how inter-war constructions of gender and femininity were linked to consumer culture and the modern and served as a codifier of modernity's tensions and promise. Conflicting messages about gender roles, she suggests, 'demonstrated the erratic movement back and forth in post-war discourse between optimism and anxiety concerning change, between proclaiming the new world and climbing to the old' (Roberts 1994: 159). Within this post-war reconstruction of definitions of femininity 'fashion was often associated with American consumer culture', creating 'an ethos of mobility and speed in tune with the "freedoms" of modern life' (Roberts 1993: 674–75). Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar have observed in their study of Popular Front culture how 'in Paris, as elsewhere, fashion both produced and depended on the "modern woman" whose image circulated at high speed from films and glossy magazines to downtown shopping' (2005: 269).

As the cinema established its central place in international leisure practices, the star system became one of the defining characteristics of the fully fledged

industrial capitalist system of Hollywood and its commercial commitment to consumption. This was in contrast to France where the relative absence of a star system was 'due primarily to the distinctive nature of its production system and to the less developed form of capitalism of which that in turn was a symptom' (Crisp 1993: 225). Most of the stars discussed in mass circulation film magazines were associated with the woman's film, a category of film designed to appeal to a female audience that never crystallized into a genre in French cinema as it did in Hollywood of the 1930s and 1940s. One of the key features of the woman's film was the focus on stars' fashion and glamour (Basinger 1993). Often modelled on their American counterparts such as *Photoplay*, popular French film magazines reconfigured the promotion of stars for a French public, often underlining the cultural specificity of French cinema, stardom and eroticism (Montebello 2005: 25). In conjunction with reviews and reports on French film production, distribution and exhibition, mass circulation magazines were also devoted to chronicling the lives of famous actors and actresses, relaying advice from film celebrities to their female fans with beauty tips, articles on women's fashion and advice columns. Letters to the editor, reader contributions and beauty contests aimed to involve their readers through what Marsha Orgeron has called 'the concept of interactivity [...] reproducing spectators not only as consumers but also as actors' (2009: 4, original emphasis).

In the French cinema of the 1930s, there is a handful of dangerous, seductive and treacherous women but none are as fatal or mysterious as Hollywood's fatale women. The vast majority of actresses were *ingénues* or *jeunes filles en fleurs*, young modern women of child-like innocence, bright, fresh-faced, pure, overflowing with childish grace and vivacity (Crisp 2002: 247). While there is no doubt that female stars such as Annabella, Danielle Darrieux, Michèle, Morgan Simone Simon, Edwige Feuillère or Viviane Romance were extremely popular with French audiences, Hollywood female stars offered alternative models on how to be a modern woman. According to fashion historian Marylène Delbourg-Delphis, from the 1930s onwards cinema had an enormous impact on public taste (1981: 161). Introducing the average French woman to the fashionable, modern female body, the pedagogical role of cinema, she points out, was largely fulfilled by Hollywood (Delbourg-Delphis 1981: 164).

Hollywood stardom marked a crucial development in the way fashion worked 'by creating a glamorous blend of high fashion, popular spectacle and street style that was both theatrical and reproducible' (Gundle and Castelli 2006: 75). According to Charles Eckert, 'Hollywood publicity at this time was taking the tone and assuming the preoccupations of the high fashion magazine'. Moving pictures, he notes, 'functioned as living display windows [...] occupied by marvelous mannequins' (Eckert 1990: 103). Examining the relationship between Parisian women and their hair stylists, historian Steve Zdatny has observed the growing influence of Hollywood stars on stylish Parisian women:

*The Coiffures de Paris* in the early 1930s noted the 'rage' for blond tints, especially the 'platinum' blonde featured in the 1934 film of the same name and starring Jean Harlow, who was bound to make the new look a prodigious triumph. As the decade unfolded other movie stars introduced new styles. In 1935, it was the Katharine Hepburn look. Two years later, according to the *Coiffures de Paris*, Joan Crawford's was the most asked-for style among *françaises*.

(2008: 240)

In recent years, feminist historians have suggested that the development of mass consumer culture and commodities such as cosmetics and fashion has had a destabilizing effect on nineteenth-century cultural hierarchies, offering women a language through which they could articulate new demands, concerns and desires, this in a period when 'women's relationship to the civic, economic and "social" public realm were under renegotiation' (Peiss 1996: 331). Hollywood 'helped to create new standards of appearance and bodily presentation, bringing home to a mass audience the importance of "looking good". It publicised the new consumer culture values and projected images of the glamorous celebrity lifestyle to a worldwide audience' (Featherstone 1982: 23).

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss recalled how in the 1930s Hollywood taught women to walk in a new way: 'I was ill in New York. I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. At last I realised that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they, too, were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to cinema' (1934: 100).

In the 1935 feature article 'Photogénie', female stars are presented as Hollywood's main source of pleasure: 'what is the attraction of American films? The uncontested supremacy they exert on world production has been analyzed at great length: their rhythm, their technicians, their working methods and so on. But what about their women?' (Holbane 1935: 3). The image of the modern woman often reflected the observation and adaptation of female body practices performed by Hollywood stars and actresses as changes in perceptions of women and femininity are documented throughout fashion and health and beauty features. A series of articles in *Pour Vous* asked readers: 'are you the Joan Crawford/Dolores del Rio/Danielle Darrieux/Marlene Dietrich/Claudette Colbert/etc. type?', while another in *Cinéma* offered star advice: 'do you know how to be attractive?' by Claudette Colbert/Janet Gaynor/Irene Dunne/Fay Wray/Madge Evans. According to my sample, the modern femininity elaborated in the columns of *Cinéma*, *Ciné-Miroir* and *Pour Vous* seems to have constructed the modern woman from both local and transnational elements of film culture, and thus changing values of femininity seem to have often met with deeply localized embeddings of femininity. The new beauty standards, sexual mores and social habits fostered by Hollywood stars were adapted for the French new woman in a blending of traditional French definitions of middle-class femininity and an image of the modern American young woman. In 1936, the advice columnist of *Pour Vous* explained that film stars were largely responsible for the transformation of French femininity: 'the young woman who sees an artist she admires wearing a gracious piece of clothing will try to emulate her' (De Biezville 1936a: 13). Hollywood stars seemed to provide a modern and glamorous feminine imagery, offering gendered images of fantasy and desire. This involved the construction of a femininity that encouraged French women to take up sports, and to be fashionable and slender in order to be up to the physical standards of modern American women and Hollywood lifestyles. But in addition to the glamour of Hollywood stardom, Hollywood stars also personified novel and attractive social types and identities. For instance, a feature in *Pour Vous* of January 1936 entitled 'Let's get rid of men and govern!' noted that 'Ann Dvorak is with Joan Crawford one of the artists that best represent the type of the American young woman, independent, active and determined to play an active role in society' (A. D. 1936: 3).

In a *Ciné-Miroir* feature of 1933 discussing the emerging young generation of Hollywood actresses entitled 'Why they don't marry', actress Silvia Harvey declared that 'The modern woman, who has won her independence, knows that she does not need to be kept by a man' (Sunlight 1933: 231), and in 1936, Carole Lombard's *Pour Vous* advice column explained that 'every woman should have a job or an occupation [...] too many young girls only have one ambition to fulfill: marriage [...] it is important but it should not completely take over a woman's life' (Anon. 1936a: 3). Beauty, fashion and stars' features often promoted a discourse of independence and individual personality. In an advice column on the latest fashionable hairstyles of 1935, fashion was linked to female individuality, self-expression and independence: 'None is more *coquette* than the modern woman [...] But one should leave the following of such rigorous fashion decrees to those who are idle and abandon themselves daily to the hands of their hairdressers. Have a bit of personality!' (De Biezville 1935: 13) French fan magazine columnists also promoted the view that French women were as fashionable, as slim and as active as their American counterparts: 'American artists' taste for sport has been praised for far too long, as if French actresses had spurned outdoor activities and violent exercise', noted one concerned observer. 'These three (Annabella, Marcelle Chantal, Mary Glory) at least can rival Hollywood stars in the field of sports' (Garriques 1934: 452). The use of star images also suggested to the female consumer that social mobility was possible through cultivating glamour and the purchase of beauty products, while enjoyment of outdoor activities suggested an unwillingness to be restricted to the domestic domain (Barlow et al. 2005). Berry argues that 'stars typify the ideals promoted by consumer culture and its emphasis on appearances rather than inherited social rank and identity. Consumer culture's promotion of constant change and planned obsolescence not only foregrounded the ideas that clothes make the woman but also facilitated the deconstruction of traditional assumptions about class, race and gender' (2000: 185).

In France, more and more women were visiting institutes of beauty. *The Beauty Industry*, a French publication of 1930, pointed out that 'the success of feminism had increased, rather than destroyed, demand: women competing for jobs with men had to look their best' (Marwick in Martin 1930 [1988]: 298). The growing use of cosmetics coincided with a new conception of beauty based on the idea of the plasticity of the body. Human beings could take control and shape and improve their body by exercise, diet and even surgery. According to Delbourg-Delphis, 'the static body became alterable and malleable; a raw material that can be worked upon to be made beautiful and youthful' (1981: 118). Suzanne Chantal, in a 1935 *Cinémonde* article entitled 'The ideal venus', maps out a theoretical ideal of female beauty that comprises Jean Harlow's chest, Joan Crawford's profile, Gloria Swanson's feet and ankles and Ann Dvorak's back as a composite of body parts that women should strive to achieve to improve on their looks (Chantal 1935a: 328). Moreover, as Mike Featherstone has observed, the "'performing self" became more widely accepted in the inter-war years, with advertising, Hollywood and the popular press legitimating the new ideal for a wider audience' (1982: 28). Indeed, as Hollywood actress Janet Macdonald asserted in a *Cinémonde* beauty feature of January 1935, 'One isn't born pretty, one becomes it [...] there are some women who although they are endowed with an ordinary physique, know how to use it cleverly and literally "construct" for themselves a polished, skilful and lasting beauty' (Anon 1935: 87).



## FRENCH ELEGANCE VERSUS HOLLYWOOD GLAMOUR

The presentation of many contradictory ideas around the idea of the modern woman coalesced around star images, with many features contrasting the contemporary Hollywood star with her French counterpart. Hollywood stars were primarily associated with glamour and modernity, while French stars were considered less hieratic and 'mythical' than their Hollywood counterparts. The French were seen as less packaged and less overtly sexual while the Hollywood star offered the image of an alluring, exotic and different femininity, one that contrasted with the French. The French star was deemed to be 'a nice little *bourgeoise* [...] a woman like any other' (M.M. B *Cinéma*, 18 July 1935), whereas the star made in Hollywood, according to Suzanne Chantal, was curious and rather more exotic, 'strange and dazzling, an exceptional being' (1935b). According to Tytti Soila, the norms provided by Hollywood move along the 'axes of distance and closeness' (2009: 6, original emphasis). Thus, in Europe, if 'Hollywood stood for glamour and distant utopia – artificiality in a sense – then domestic stars should feature the difference by reflecting authenticity and closeness' (Soila 2009: 8).

In many ways late 1930s fashions could be described as the age of elegance. In contrast to the short skirts and bobbed hair of the 1920s *garçonne* look, fashions of the early 1930s were 'sculptural', evoking Greek antiquity 'with a masculine silhouette and femininity confined to the details' (Delbourg-Delphis 1981: 134). In a 1934 feature entitled 'Star dresses: Those that fascinate', the fashion writer of *Pour Vous* urged that the well-dressed woman of good taste should avoid 'frills and furbelows, feathers and froufrou'. To imitate her favourite star, her goal should be an unshowy chic and youthful fresh looks and not the out of fashion allure of the femme fatale: 'Jean Harlow was one of the first to adopt taffeta couture dresses. She has understood that a simple, well cut dress in one of those beautiful silk materials [...] can be as becoming as the most glittering sequined dress' (de Bieville 1934: 130). In a column entitled 'On elegance', screen and stage actress Lise Delamare, who had just appeared as Marie-Antoinette in Jean Renoir's *La Marseillaise* (1938), emphasized the virtues of simplicity and sobriety: 'elegance is about moral satisfaction, a feeling of joy and well-being' (Delamare 1935: 7).

The 1930s, according to fashion historian Delbourg-Delphis, was the age of elegance and of 'the decent woman', which meant that 'invisible cosmetics were associated with an aesthetic of refinement that implied the abolition of luxury' (1981: 150). In contrast to the exotic otherness of Hollywood stars and their ostentatious excess and idiosyncrasy, the specificity of the French woman, *la femme chic* symbolized by the *Parisienne*, was constructed mostly as a function of elegance, intelligence, soberness and distinction. This archetypal Parisian woman was at once 'the essence of French femininity but also a superior being whose identity resides in her belonging to the Parisian territory'; she is 'the material embodiment of the French capital' (Rocamora 2006: 48, 51). According to a *Ciné-Miroir* column of 1936, the ideal of the modern French woman was Marcelle Chantal, an actress who epitomized the respectable ideal woman, the decent female type of the 1930s:

She represents the modern woman par excellence. One only has to see her in the apartment she has chosen on the 7th floor of a new building. There is a vast study filled with masses of curious objects, many books on serious and deep subjects: poetry, history, and foreign literature.



Marcelle Chantal speaks English as well as French. She remains above all a musician.

(Anon. 1936b: 67)

Though the use of cosmetics as a form of performative consumption was encouraged, beauty features emphasized repeatedly the idea that in making up and dressing up women should express their individuality. As one magazine reported, 'Each woman must above all find her personality and not become standardized; that is what we can reproach American women' (De Biezville 1936b: 15). Beauty and fashion columns profiling female stars and their use of cosmetics emphasized a philosophy of natural beauty – making up could be distinguished if discreet: 'to wear too much make-up is the greatest curse of the elegant woman (*la femme chic*) [...] All actresses express their personality in the way they wear make-up. They know how to stay themselves: this is the secret of perfect make-up' (Hellinger 1935a: 592).

The system of national difference set up in the construction of ideals of femininity crystallized in the discourse on fashion and in articles that often dealt defensively with Hollywood's international influence. It is scarcely surprising that as the Depression struck France in 1934 and French film production also entered into a period of crisis, the discourse on fashion would not be affected. Paris and Hollywood were crucial to fashion and cinema. Tag Gronberg has demonstrated how during the 1925 Paris exhibition, 'the work of haute-couture was one means of defining Paris as the centre of the "modern" and consequently France "in advance of other nations"' (1998: 30). However, Hollywood seemed to be a threat to French hegemony in matters of taste, taking over Paris in terms of its worldwide influence both in fashion and in the field of cinema. Figures of glamour par excellence, 'Hollywood stars had become the bearers of the erotic femininity that was previously the preserve of the *Parisienne*' (Grundle 2008: 180).

Fashion features often inserted both pro-and anti-American commentaries into their articles on the latest styles during 1936, for instance. Features in *Cinémonde*, *Pour Vous* and *Ciné-Miroir* were very ambivalent about the influence of Hollywood and worried about its impact on French fashion: 'There is only one fashion and it is French', claimed a fashion feature in *Pour Vous* in 1935, 'With numerous press campaigns, the Americans are trying to convince their readers that Hollywood creates its own fashion and does not follow Paris. No doubt, our American friends are jealous of the supremacy of Paris in terms of fashion ... No! There is no American, German, Polish or British fashion. There is fashion full stop and it comes from Paris' (De Biezville 1935: 13).

In turn, *Cinémonde* dismissed Hollywood fashions as over the top and asked its readers, 'French women who go to the cinema, how many times while watching one of your American idols have you cried full of admiration and envy: the nice dress! Perhaps once or twice, maximum three times if you are indulgent [...] Taste is what women, stars or not, lack in America' (Déseaux 1936a: 78).

In his weekly *Ciné-Miroir* editorial, Jean Vignaud brushed aside the influence of Hollywood couturier Travis Banton on the world of fashion, arguing that

if there is one city that influences others in the field of fashion, it is not Hollywood that leads Paris, but Paris that dominates Hollywood. It is still true now despite the crisis of the luxury industries. Paris is ahead

of the world because of its chic, its elegance, of its French women of all classes. The Parisian in particular, is the best dressed of all women.

(Vignaud 1937: 650)

By the end of the 1930s, as Christopher Breward has observed,

Parisian models had become overshadowed by the marketing prowess of Hollywood. New film constructions of fashionable femininity prioritized a sense of power and purpose, achieved through a more structured approach to tailoring, padding and accessories. These were displayed in the Adrian and Edith Head costumes designed for the tougher career roles played by Joan Crawford, Betty Davis and Barbara Stanwyck after 1935.

(1995: 187)

At a time when Americanization was becoming a constant preoccupation, sober French taste was constructed in opposition to vulgar over-ornamentation: Greta Garbo herself was advised to get to grips with the crucial importance of elegance and drop Hollywood's leading dress designer Adrian. Garbo should 'refuse to be ridiculed by the shapeless bags and incredible saucepans that she is made to wear', noted one columnist (Déseaux 1936a, 1936b: 891). Hollywood stars' styles were regularly dismissed for their artificial and vulgar model of glamour in contrast with the *Parisiennes'* refined taste and sober elegance. American womanhood was thus encapsulated in the figure of the American star whose seduction, linked to exaggeration at the expense of taste, was often opposed to the quintessentially French Parisian model of elegance and sober refinement. By the end of the decade, the actress Edwige Feuillère was presented as the epitome of French chic: 'French audiences had submitted to the showy elegance of Mae West and Marlene but they have quickly come to their senses [...] If you like to embellish yourself, you should follow Edwige Feuillère' (De Biezville 1938: 13).

According to Ellen Furlough, in the inter-war period, 'the constant evocation of French "taste" and "elegance" was [...] a reflexive strategy demarcating class as well as national boundaries' (1993: 509). Moreover, the 'issue of stardom versus quality was bound up with generalized ambiguities about modernity and mass culture [...] It is an implied contrast between American and French taste'. Thus, she observes that the Americanization process in the 1930s does not seem to destroy national identities, but rather to enhance or refashion existing cultural and economic characterizations. The assertions of French distinction and superiority in terms of taste and elegance, however, can be seen as being part of a cultural preservation of social differences that were 'embedded in a general web of fear associated with modernity and the beginnings of a mass consumer society in France' (Furlough 1993: 511).

However, we can also perhaps see this ambivalence as combining a traditional self-identity of elegant taste with the new identity of the modern woman. The figure of the star whose seduction was linked to excess and a brash model of self-invention and consumption was contrasted with a French model of womanhood that connoted chic and elegance, sobriety and dignity as embodied by the archetypal Parisian woman. According to Valerie Steele, 'already, during the First World War, simplicity of dress had become *bon ton*, as it seemed only suitable to adopt a look of seriousness and subdued elegance under increasingly tragic circumstances' (1998: 247). Rather than the unattainable glamour of the Hollywood stars' glamour, 1930s French femininity

was ultimately constructed as the pared down elegance of respectable femininity: 'compared to the *garçonne* of the 1920s, the 1930s French woman spoke less of her freedom than her responsibility' (Delbourg-Delphis 1981: 148).

Thus, we can see a tension between old and new values and a fundamental contradiction in the reception of the representation of Hollywood ideals of femininity constructed in beauty and fashion features. The uptake of Hollywood stars and American cinema can thus perhaps be understood as a critical and selective reading, a source of pleasure and desire, yet without the disavowal of a more traditional, or at least local, French feminine identity. Whitney Walton has observed how the notion of the American girl during the 1920s and 1930s 'often served to focus anxieties about modernity, and to distinguish between alternative constructions of femininity that were regarded as traditionally or at least culturally French' (2005: 330). In relation to Hollywood stars, this distinction was indicative of a desire to combine a traditional self-identity of taste and elegance with the new identity of modern women.

## FILM MAGAZINES AND WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE

Although the focus on Hollywood female stars was dominated by beauty, clothing and fashion, when in 1936 president Léon Blum appointed three women ministers, given French women's difficulty in obtaining suffrage, this coopting of women to posts of responsibility was widely discussed in popular fan magazines. Suzanne Chantal's profile of Katharine Hepburn for *Cinémonde* explicitly constructed the exceptional star's persona as that of a feminist in terms of women's right to decide when to become mothers: 'The American woman votes. However, more important than political rights, there are social rights to conquer'. According to Chantal, Hepburn's mother was 'still a relentlessly advocate of female emancipation. Now, she is the most active and fervent champion of "Birth Control", which gives woman the right and the means to have only the children she wants when she wants'. This theory, 'even in America', pursued Chantal, 'still appears revolutionary. Mrs. Hepburn will only accept free willing maternity. She brings to this new crusade the same enthusiasm then when she advocated the right to vote, not as an aim but as a means to an end' (Chantal 1935c: 12). A *Cinémonde* feature entitled 'Le Féminisme au cinéma' gave an account of feminist activist Louise Weiss' campaign of April 1936 in the district of Montmartre. Weiss, who had founded the suffragist group La Femme Nouvelle/The New Woman in 1934, was accompanied by actress Françoise Rosay who had used the occasion to proclaim that 'she was a feminist because French laws had been made by men for men' (J. B. 1936: 200). After the Parisian local elections of 1936, Paule Hutzler in *Ciné-Miroir* interrogated several French actresses on the subject of women's suffrage and again Françoise Rosay was polled. As Hutzler asked, 'had not Rosay taken the platform during a feminist reunion to shout at the crowds: Women! We have had enough to be considered minors, morons and outcasts. We work, we pay our taxes, and we are mothers. We want the same rights as men: we want to vote!' (1936: 294).

Despite many archaic structures in society, French women did not have the right to vote until the post-war period, signs of change in gender positioning were evident; working-class women were leaving domestic service for jobs in the tertiary sector and middle-class women moved into the liberal professions (Milligan 1996). However, the government employed coercive measures to increase natality figures, such as the prohibition of abortion and contraception,

and traditional Catholic values that relied on motherhood and domesticity were significant and dominant in French culture. Rosay's declaration seems to reflect a version of local modernity aimed at reducing the perceived tension between American-style sexual and economic emancipation and the distinctive identity of French women's roles in domestic environments by arguing for women's equality in the context of the family. Indeed, as Rosay had argued in *Ciné-Miroir* when interviewed by Paule Hutzler, 'I am 100% feminist [...] feminism will deprive modern women neither of their charms nor of their feelings. Man's equal, they will be stronger in order to defend the interests of the home and that of the country' (Hutzler 1936: 294). Finally, in a *Cinémonde* feature of July 1935 entitled 'Stars and mothers', screen stars, both French and American, were described as the epitome of successful working women: 'in general and despite the numerous worries maternity brings them, film artists make excellent *mères de famille*'. Despite their exceptional situation and the extraordinary nature of their working lives, screen stars were seen as successfully juggling both career and family and thus achieving the female duty of motherhood: 'Stars could serve as an example for a large number of bourgeois mothers who readily argue that "these women" should not have children' (Nery 1935: 577).

## CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural perceptions are like a hall of mirrors, and in fashion and beauty columns the perceived artificial femininity of Hollywood and the standardization and anonymity they implied acted both as a forum for the reassertion of French elegance and chic and as a vehicle for the displacement of old ideas, combining a traditional identity of taste and elegance with the new identity of the modern woman. Discussing the impact of stars on women film goes, Sarah Berry has argued that women's investment in products of consumer culture such as cosmetics and fashion 'is historically linked to their entry into the service-sector work force, a context in which self-presentation and performance are material issues'. Berry points out that such participation 'does not imply that consumer fashion in itself had a liberatory effect on women, but that it could represent women's ongoing struggle for visible autonomy in the social sphere' (2000: xiii–xiv).

These female forms of cultural appropriation offer a privileged site to an understanding of historically shifting ideals and constructions of femininity through clothing and fashion, while the prominence of female writers in these mass circulation journals also tells us something more specific about the particular way in which cinema was being fashioned as a modern form of gendered everyday knowledge. A key feature of the criticism I have just discussed, and in contrast with film reviewers working with a purely aesthetic and formalist perspective, was their refusal to engage in a patronizing dismissal of the popular audience. In addition, a critical effect of this quite tightly organized division of labour between male and female journalists (most features on star fashions, health and beauty were written by women) and which characterized the popular film press of the period is that it provided a key locus for a popular, feminine cinephilia neglected in existing accounts of French film culture. As Victoria de Grazia has suggested, the mass circulation film press 'promoted those values of personal independence, female self-assertiveness, and individual fulfillment that had in some measure been advanced by the early-twentieth-century feminist movement itself' (De Grazia and Furlough 1996: 181). De Grazia has indicated the significance of American movies across Europe for the formation of what she describes as

a 'new woman peer culture', where the cinema afforded 'a kind of imaginary space' and 'offered possibilities of individual development practically impervious to the clumsy discipline of traditional state, community or familial authority' (1989: 86). If the popular cinephilia nurtured in the much-maligned mass circulation film journals of the 1930s has often been regarded as trivial and by extension feminine taste as inferior, unworthy of investigation and devoid of political intentions, it is perhaps possible to see their discourse on stars and fashion as part of an everyday gendered social experience of the cinema and as addressing specifically female spectatorial interests. As a gendered form of cultural expression in the context of the French inter-war period, 'Fashion was not "politics" as we are used to conceiving it, but the debates over its meaning in postwar France were profoundly political' (Roberts 1994: 87). Although it would be wrong to describe mass circulation magazines as appealing to women only, regular fashion, beauty and star advice columns, as well as the reporting on feminism and women's suffrage, indicate that they served as a key site for women's negotiation of modernity.

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