

**Praxis**

"So oft to the movies they've been": British fan writing and female audiences in the silent cinema

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[0.1] *Abstract*—This article aims to address the ways in which working-class and lower-middle-class British women used silent-era fan magazines as a space for articulating their role within the development of a female film culture. The article focuses on letter pages that formed a key site for female contribution to British fan magazines across the silent era. In contributing to these pages, women found a space to debate and discuss the appeal and significance of particular female representations within film culture. Using detailed archival research tracing the content of a specific magazine, *Picturegoer*, across a 15-year period (1913–28), the article will show the dominance of particular types of female representation in both fan and "official" magazine discourses, analyzing the ways in which British women used these images to work through national tensions regarding modern femininity and traditional ideas of female propriety and restraint.

[0.2] *Keywords*—1910s–20s Britain; Fan culture; Fan magazine; Female stars; Nationality; Women's writing; Costume; Performance

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[1.1] Women's fan writing about silent cinema as it appears in British fan magazines presents one of the most interesting generative aspects of film culture as female cultural practice. Fan letters are an example of women's involvement in creating film culture as a topic to be written about. British women found a platform to express their interpretation of their nationally specific cinematic encounters within the fan magazine as a new form of extratextual print ephemera shadowing the growth of cinema culture.

[1.2] The affirmation of cinema as a topic worthy of written debate engaged notions of high- and lowbrow cultural divisions in the early 20th century and the place of cinema within this divide. Fan theory has analyzed the deconstruction of this high/low binary of cultural forms in fan activity, which proceeds by "treating popular texts as if they merited the same degree of attention and appreciation as canonical texts" (Jenkins 1992, 17). Breaking with approaches to fandom that have sought to "construct a sustainable opposition between the 'fan' and the 'consumer,'" Matt Hills suggests that fans are capable of "simultaneously 'resisting' norms of capitalist society" while also being "implicated in these very economic and cultural processes" (2002, 29). Hills suggests that the status of fans as "ideal consumers" who at the same time "express anticommercial beliefs" constitutes a necessarily irresolvable contradiction that needs to be "tolerated" by the researcher, rather than subsumed under a banner of totalizing resistance to commercial discourses (2002, 29).

[1.3] Hills's attention to this contradictory positioning of fandom is valuable for exploring the ways in which female silent-film fans embraced the commercialized discourses of the fan magazine as a way to "write back," creating alternative readings from within commercial forms. By discussing and debating film in fan letters, female fans articulated a knowledgeable authority on the subject of cinema culture, entrenched within a national fan community linked by the shared consumption of fan magazines.

[1.4] Fan magazines allow the researcher to explore female fan culture beyond the confines of the exhibition site, reading silent cinema as a phenomenon that reached, influenced, and fundamentally was used by women in multiple representational spheres. In her 2000 study, *Perverse Spectators*, Janet Staiger argues that contextual factors primarily

determine the experiences of spectators and how these experiences are put to use in everyday life. Crucially, Staiger removes the "meaning" of a film from the film text itself. Following Staiger, a key methodological impetus behind this article is the desire to move beyond theoretical readings of gendered silent audiences derived primarily from the analysis of film texts. Fan letters help the researcher move closer to unearthing a range of examples of the voices of actual female spectators.

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## 2. Cinema and women's popular press in early 20th-century Britain

[2.1] Adrian Bingham's work on gender and the popular press in interwar Britain has been significant in acknowledging that popular products like magazines have more to offer than patriarchal dictations on the appropriate role of contemporary models of femininity. Daily journalism of the late teens and twenties did not "unthinkingly champion housewifery and motherhood; its pages debated and explored what these roles meant for women and society, offered a range of perspectives, and explicitly and implicitly contrasted them with other possible roles" (2004, 17).

[2.2] What is interesting about the fan magazine's place within these journalistic discourses is its construction of a space for women to write back alongside the presentation of differing ideas about modern womanhood. Published fan letters testify to the personal resonance that filmic encounters held for working-class and lower-middle-class British women in the immediate postwar era. Further than this, they challenge the superficiality of leisure experiences, emphasizing the way in which ephemeral traces of women's engagement with leisure forms insist upon themselves as historically significant traces of a period of cultural transformation for British women.

[2.3] As the cinema rapidly established its place within British leisure practices, progressing from shop-front spectacle of the early 1900s to the city-center picture palaces by the teens, femininity as both a personal and social construct had transformed just as fundamentally within British culture.

[2.4] Lower-class British women of this period were "constituted in a matrix of factors: improved educational opportunities, new employment prospects, higher wages...[and] increased leisure time" (Giles 2004, 48) ([note 1](#)). In tandem with these changes, working-class and lower-middle-

class women were experiencing greater independence in the public arena, and the cinema was increasingly a focal point for women's public leisure.

[2.5] By 1916, the UK cinema audience was estimated at 20 million, with 5,000 purpose-built cinema venues and 5,400 regular film shows (Hiley 1998, 97). Roughly half the population were regular cinemagoers by 1917, when some 21 million tickets were being sold each week at an average price of fourpence (Hiley 1998, 101).

[2.6] How, then, did the fan magazine figure within these cultural and industrial developments? Targeting a female readership, fan magazines were aligned with the turn in British print journalism toward "the private sphere of home and family" in an attempt to solicit a broader female audience (LeMahieu 1988, 33). The creation of the successful women's journal *Forget-Me-Not* in 1891, followed by the popular weekly magazine *Home Chat* in 1894, assisted in pushing print journalism toward a realization of a mass market of working-class and lower-middle-class women. From the turn of the century on, the British press began to make "intense efforts...to attract female readers" (LeMahieu 1988, 26) ([note 2](#)).

[2.7] It made economic sense, therefore, for the creators of fan magazines to similarly cultivate a female readership. In doing so, fan magazines paralleled women's magazines and the women's pages of daily newspapers in targeting a female audience as the figures of financial control over leisure and consumption within the family unit. As LeMahieu assesses, "it was women who shopped for food, bought clothes, paid the rent, and made the daily financial decisions" (1988, 33). Newspapers and advertising became firmly linked as a way of targeting female readers in the recognition of this female control over disposable income. Fan magazines similarly attempted to strike a balance between original content and advertising space.

[2.8] British fan magazines appeared on the UK market from the 1910s. Publications such as *Picturashow* (1919–60), *Picturegoer* (1913–60), and *Girls Cinema* (1920–32) were among the most popular national periodicals. Magazines like *Girls Cinema* were extremely close in tone and content to the cheapest women's magazines of the era, such as *Peg's Paper*, which explicitly targeted working-class young women. *Picturegoer* (figure 1) combined elements of these working-girl magazine formats ([note 3](#)) with higher-quality production values,

featuring illustrated cover images (regularly in color by 1924), fashion spreads, and an array of advertising addressing domestic labor.



**Figure 1.** *The Picturegoer*, April 1922, vol. 3, no. 16. [[View larger image.](#)]

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### 3. *Picturegoer*

[3.1] *Picturegoer* was selected as the main focus of this study for several reasons. Archival holdings of the magazine ([note 4](#)) constitute one of the most complete and accessible collections from the silent era, offering greater scope for the recognition of trends and changes within the publication across larger periods of time. In terms of its status as a popular artifact, *Picturegoer* was also one of the longest-running magazines of its kind, founded in 1913 and remaining in circulation for nearly 50 years. It was in the late teens and twenties that the magazine laid these long-lasting foundations as Britain's leading cinema periodical, marketing itself as "the screen's most popular magazine" (March 1928, 3).

[3.2] Published weekly initially and later monthly at a price of twopence, the same price as other working-class to lower-middle-class women's magazines like *Home Chat* and *Women's Weekly*, the magazine was cheap

enough to ensure a steady readership across a wide community of women. Although *Picturegoer* was not exclusively a women's magazine, the tone of the publication was overridingly geared toward female readers—increasingly so across the decade—with an excess of women's articles, female fan contributions, and female-targeted advertising. The format of the periodical fell into a generally standardized structure by the late teens and changed little till the end of the silent era, following a basic layout that included news of present and forthcoming features, reviews, star gossip, fashion spreads, interviews, star portraits, short story adaptations, and poetry and letter pages. Beginning as the "Bouquets and Brickbats" (or occasionally the "Our Letter Bag"/"The Letter Box Editors") section in the early teens, *Picturegoer's* letters page became a far more established section by around 1921, adopting the "What Do You Think?" heading and receiving a fixed page number and personality editor under the title "The Thinker," who called upon readers to keep the page "filled with letters that reflect credit on the high intelligence of all film fans" (January 1928, 60). The poetry page, too, which began as a rare addition in the early teens, was given a more fixed position within the magazine by around 1922 under the heading "Kinema Carols."

[3.3] The nature of the silent cinema experience created a void of extratextual knowledge that *Picturegoer* readily filled, providing primary access for female readers to such coveted information as the eye and hair color of stars, and insights into their speaking voices. A *Picturegoer* fan letter by "Hilary" from 1924 underscores this fan desire to know more about screen personalities:

[3.4] It would be a boon and a blessing to many if the cast were shown at the end as well as the beginning of films, because no one but an expert Pelmanist can memorize an entire cast in the short time during which it is shown, especially if some of the names are new. (December 1924, 102) ([note 5](#))

[3.5] Another fan writing in the same issue of *Picturegoer* goes further:

[3.6] I should like to mention one little point with regard to the film which, I have no doubt, would be a great improvement in the eyes of the audiences in our picture houses...My suggestion is this. That after each film of any importance, a few feet of film be used to show the chief actors and actresses as they appear in real life. I have mentioned this point to

several of my friends and they approve of it...If, in any way, we could influence the taking-up of this idea, I'm sure it would improve the kinema greatly. (December 1924, 102) ([note 6](#))

[3.7] *Picturegoer's* ability to portray, however fabricated, some sense of how stars "appear in real life" was a key reason for the pull that silent-era fan magazines held over women's imaginations in their ability to offer greater intimacy with screen stars. *Picturegoer* created a primary position for itself at the heart of cinema culture in this way.

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#### 4. Negotiating British femininity

[4.1] In its mediation of female representations, the official content of *Picturegoer* attempted something of a balancing act, allowing space for the exploration of female self-expression while simultaneously affirming more conservative gender values. Advertising bordering almost every page of the publication constructed narratives of domestic and heterosexual female independence in relation to narratives of consumer desire.

[4.2] *Picturegoer* advertisements for Persil washing powder across the 1920s, for example, promised to have "abolished wash-day" (December 1923, 17) and given "the freedom to a million women...to call your day your own," (April 1927, 68) while Perservene boasted that washing could be finished in "record time...to dress and off to the pictures in the afternoon" (December 1923, 17). Khansana lipstick promotions, echoing dozens of cosmetic advertisements in the magazine, guaranteed "a new thrill for every women—in her mirror" (January 1928, 55). These narratives of "thrill" and free time were safely contained within domestic structures, which ultimately led the consuming female gaze from products designed to create leisure opportunities and personal allure back to home, family, and female domesticity (improving the routine of "wash day," and so on).

[4.3] The written content of the magazine fed into the construction of these narratives of temporary liberation by excessively foregrounding the "voice" and self-expression of female stars. One of the most prominent aspects of the magazine is the dominance of the pronoun and the possessive in interview and article headings—"What I Should Like to Be" (January 1920, 40); "Mainly About Me" (October 1921, 22); "Why I Like

Work" (October 1918, 343); "How I Got a Start" (February 1918, 173); "When My Chance Came" (April 1921, 22); "How I Felt in Pictures" (March 1918, 227)—along with direct questions to the reader—"Why Should Women Propose?" (May 1920, 533); "Have We No 'It' Girls?" (December 1928, 39); "Who Is the Most Popular Film Star?" (February 1925, 4).

[4.4] A strong sense of the importance of female opinion can be gleaned from these articles. Yet while bestowing apparent self-definition with one hand, the magazine paralleled its advertising in efforts to reinforce the temporary nature of such discourses with the other, affirming a heterosexual domestic focus within much of its sustained writing about the private lives of female stars.

[4.5] A regular crop of "star home life" articles praising the domesticity of female stars appeared across the decade. Interviews with the stunt star Ruth Roland, for example, while acknowledging her abilities in boxing, riding, shooting, and fencing, stressed that the title "homebody Ruth" (January 1921, 34) was much closer to her real personality. Articles offset her "masculinity" against the more feminized image of a "pretty, dainty, and winsome" (February 1918, 173) star who professed to "love cooking" (June 1921, 43) and represented "as much of a home-girl as the most old-fashioned of our grandparents could desire" (June 1921, 43).

[4.6] Articles with headings such as "What Women Want" (June 1925, 1) and "The Happy Ending: Is It Really Wanted?" (April 1920, 490) could therefore sit alongside more traditional topics concerning clothing, cooking, child-rearing, and homemaking, emphasizing domesticity and familial responsibility in the offscreen lives of female stars.

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## 5. Writing back

[5.1] Through written interaction with the magazine, however, female audiences were able to show their awareness of the compromise implicit in such contradictory constructions of modern femininity. Letter writers demonstrated, to use Gaylyn Studlar's phrase, an "I-know-but-nevertheless" (1996, 269) attitude toward such representations and the discourses of emulation they promoted. The fan magazine's ability to offer a platform for the female fan's own voice ensured there was at least a possibility for women to demonstrate an understanding of the ideological trade-off inherent within the consumption of popular female culture.



[5.2] To illustrate this attitude, I offer an example of a fan letter written by "Irene" in 1926:

[5.3] Can you tell me why all interviewers rave and sigh about how simple, sad and sweet are all the stars they ever meet? Apparently the poor young dears are almost driven to hot salt tears because they earn so much each week. Their voices break when they try to speak of the ravishing gowns they *hate* to wear...and how they loathe the horrid glare publicity forces them to bear! They'd love to live in a small back street and have to fight to make ends meet; they'd sooner wear a gingham frock than queen it in a "Paris shock." Where *did* they learn this courage pray, that hides their heartache day by day, at having to drive in imported cars and live in mansions (poor little stars!) when all the time they long and pine for floors to scrub and wool to twine...Perhaps some day a kinder Fate—will let some sweet star clean my grate, at six in the morning—*and* light the fire...then, then she will gain her life's desire! (January 1926, 66)

[5.4] Irene's letter foregrounds a central irritation with the hypocritical presentation of film stars who profess to detest their material wealth and success. The interviewers she discusses are able to list and thereby emphasize the various examples of star prosperity and luxury—"ravishing gowns," "Paris shocks," "imported cars," "mansions," and so on—while framing them as points of burden in the lives of female stars, depicting screen personalities as reluctant consumers.

[5.5] Irene taps into the double bind whereby the representation of women as pure consumers was encouraged within commercial products like the fan magazine (in order to ensure continued purchase) while at the same time framed with disapproval where such pure consumption endangered notions of appropriate female modesty. As Sue Bruley has shown, in the postwar era it was "single women who were especially vilified in the media as being useless members of society," while "married women workers were not tolerated" (1999, 62). The female star as independently successful working woman, therefore—single or married and on constant display as an object of consumer desire—directly provoked these attitudes.

[5.6] Jackie Stacey's work on Hollywood cinema and British female spectatorship in *Star Gazing* (1994) explores the way cinema and

consumption were linked as discourses that relied upon the construction of a desiring female gaze. Stacey argues that the female consumption of star images was intertwined with the British experience of "the expansion of consumer capitalism" from the turn of the century onward (1994, 179). Erika D. Rappaport has shown, for example, how "new images of femininity which highlighted the centrality of women in urban life were integral to the development and success of mass consumer culture in early twentieth-century England" (1995, 149). Star images formed an important part of this network of new female representations interrelated with consumer culture.

[5.7] Stacey argues that cinema "shaped consumer habits" by aligning itself with consumer culture developments through "the display of the female star as commodity" (1994, 180). She emphasizes the strong parallels between "goods and stars...on display to spectators as desirable spectacles" (1994, 179).

[5.8] Irene's letter would seem to support this view, dealing explicitly with the subject of her own consumption of the extratextual marketing of female stars in fan magazines, where the discussion of female stars often focused upon the translation of high earnings into the display of consumer goods ("ravishing gowns," "imported cars," etc.).

[5.9] The fan magazine's attempts to mask the direct display of women's *enjoyment* of their earnings as professional performers speaks to the paradox of a consumer culture. Relative female economic freedom was required in order for women to engage with consumer culture and the commercialized images of female lifestyle it constructed, yet unease persisted within British culture about the excessive commodification and display of the female image.

[5.10] In letters like Irene's, lower-class women were able to challenge the fan magazine's way of dealing with this paradox—in Irene's case, refusing to accept what she perceives as the false humility of stars. Other female letter writers discussed the problematic representation of female performers as domestic laborers within film narratives. Some expressed frustration with attempts to construct points of identification between working-class viewers and actresses, just as Irene expresses frustration with the attempts of interviewers to construct star personas in sympathy with working women.

[5.11] A letter writer in 1923, for example, complains about films focusing upon "domestic troubles which most of us can see for ourselves outside the movies" (September 1923, 66). An earlier reader in 1918 expresses a similar attitude:

[5.12] One goes to the picture shows to be amused, not to be dragged through reels of someone's troubles, and I think when our producers realise this, and give us something lighter and brighter, they will have all the successes they, and we, desire. (August–September 1918, 234)

[5.13] Writing seven years later, another female fan expresses the persistence of the same irritation, insisting the trade was "pathetically wrong" (June 1925, 12) in expecting "women in the audience to prefer homely stories and domestic ventures" (June 1925, 13). ([note 7](#))

[5.14] The attempts of the industry to appeal to working-class values was not always a point of irritation, however. Some female fans applauded the filmic representation of the modern female experiences of laboring women. One fan identifying herself as a working girl, for example, praises the presentation of female experience in a Pauline Frederick film amid an audience of "women, experienced in the drama of life, who closely follow the great actress as she works out a problem or question of to-day" (March 1918, 283).

[5.15] Women across the spectrum of working-class and lower-middle-class British femininity, therefore, used the letters page to debate both the appeal and the problems of points of identification between female audiences and female stars within a network of film texts, magazine representation, and personal experience.

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## 6. Fan community

[6.1] As the letter from 1923 demonstrates in its discussion of the "us" and "we" of the female audience, fan participation allowed readers to independently reach out to other women for their thoughts and opinions on these kinds of issues. One reader describes the letter-writing community of *Picturegoer* as a "delightful debating society, open to all readers" (August 1928, 56), highlighting the significance of the page as a site for communal discussion and analysis. Many contributing *Picturegoer* fans were keen to establish their interest in

debating cinema culture as separate from a stereotypical image of the obsessive film fanatic. *Picturegoer* reader Greta Gray, for example, begins her letter by asserting:

[6.2] It has always been my opinion that continual raving in print over a favourite star is injurious to his or her interests rather than otherwise, and for that reason I have refrained from writing to you before...I am not a "hysterical flapper." (December 1925, 98)

[6.3] Another reader similarly asserts she is "NOT a 'fan,' but keenly critical" (July 1926, 66); another, on discussing Rudolph Valentino, says, "I am no silly flapper" (February 1923, 66). Fan poetry also often mocked the image of the fan as one whose "critical sense / comes lagging behind!" (March 1925, 64).

[6.4] Rather than simply writing "carols and mush / To the stars that they worship" (October 1924, 50), therefore, women used the letters page to discuss their understanding of the cinema as an industry as well as a leisure-time experience. Some female contributors debated such subjects as the problems facing British film production, particularly in relation to its seeming inability to create successful internationally appealing female stars. Others railed against the lack of sophistication of films for women in general, reacting negatively to objectified feminine images in favor of more plot-heavy pictures, since, as one fan explains, "in nine out of ten pictures the story is absolutely nothing; all one sees is a set of photographic poses" (June 1924, 66).

[6.5] There was considerable disagreement among fans over what exactly it was "the public really wanted" (May 1920, 568). Some called for greater realism in the cinema with films "which deal frankly and truthfully with life" (March 1918, 282), while some wanted the screen to present purely escapist fantasies enabling the viewer to be "carried away from this workaday world and its troubles" (September 1923, 66). Women were united in these debates, nonetheless, in the general assertion that the industry's conception of the ways in which women identified with cinematic female representations was out of step with actual female audiences. Fan letters often called upon the collective influence of fans in an attempt to reconcile their preferences with the types of films produced and exhibited by the industry and the quality of the cinemagoing experience.

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## 7. Virtual community

[7.1] The virtual community of the letters page further offered an alternative access point to the enjoyment of film, far less fraught with the potential physical hazards of cinema space. Numerous British postcards of the era drawing upon the experience of cinemagoing for their humorous illustrations emphasized cinema space as an arena of courtship. Such examples often tended toward a depiction of male coercion, showing male characters enticing innocent female companions into cinema space with the hope of engineering a romantic or sexual encounter (figures 2 and 3). Female community within the cinema venue itself may have been difficult to disentangle from such encounters, or from the exposure to a male audience "just above the breadline" (Dewes 1983, 18), who used film theaters as an escape from the cold and a cheap refuge from the street.



**Figure 2.** "They that go in darkness." Comic cinema postcard, circa 1913. (Image taken from University of Exeter's Bill Douglas Centre archive, item BDCEXE 87541.) [[View larger image.](#)]



' ' What could be nicer ? ' '

**Figure 3.** "What could be nicer?" Comic cinema postcard, circa 1910. (Image taken from University of Exeter's Bill Douglas Centre archive, item BDCEXE 87654.) [[View larger image.](#)]

[7.2] Attempts by exhibitors to appeal to working-class audiences by welcoming the family into cinema space may be a further reason for women investing in the female-centered virtual community of the fan magazine. The rise of purpose-built cinemas attracted "whole families of industrial classes" (Calvert 1911, 4), and as such may have often denied women independent escapism from familial and domestic interaction.

[7.3] Fan writing, therefore, facilitated the creation of new communal spheres distanced from the cinema-going act itself. Letter writing encouraged women to identify themselves as part of a virtual fan community, creating and sustaining social networks. The following extract highlights the way women felt the cinema magazine brought them together in its ability to unite women across broad class and geographical origins:

[7.4] I have read PICTURES every week for nearly two years, and I find that in nearly every issue there are letters from folks from different parts of the country giving their ideas—admiring and criticising every part of the film industry. It is only through PICTURES that we are able to express our opinions, and I think that we should be brought even closer together...Let's have more public opinion. (May–June 1918, 518)

[7.5] Many such comments by contributing fans seem to indicate that, although the viewing experience was a shared one spatially, written fan interaction offered something unique and valuable, disengaged from the potentially fraught environment of cinema space.

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## 8. *Picturegoer* stars

[8.1] Female reception as it emerges from fan magazine discourse, therefore, is made distinctive by the magazine's ability to offer a platform for the expression of female choice, desire, and community. Fan letters illuminate the ways in which cinema functioned in women's lives not simply as passive involvement within mass consumer culture, but as a practice that served emotional and intellectual needs, embraced by many female readers as offering an active, self-reflexive female reception.

[8.2] The central focus of women's discussion, however, remains the figure of the female star, which functioned as a keystone for contested ideas of contemporary female behavior and appearance. Mapping those stars most featured and discussed in *Picturegoer* tells us several things about the way British fan magazines operated financially in relation to the commodification of female stars. Fan magazines relied heavily on financing from both the film industry (publicists offered money in exchange for coverage of the stars whose movies they were promoting) and external companies, whose non-cinema-related advertising littered the pages of fan publications.

[8.3] Such advertising compelled publishers like Odhams, which produced *Picturegoer*, to balance what they perceived as the demands of their readership with their need for funding. *Picturegoer* featured a large amount of advertising, as already touched upon, promoting a range of female-targeted domestic and cosmetic products, yet was also dotted with star promotions. The twopence cover price of the magazine placed it in the midrange of film magazines on the market at the time—not cheap

enough to force an overwhelming reliance on advertising finance, but enough to make these factors prevalent in the presentation of female images and the commodification of actresses as product promoters.

[8.4] These factors obviously cast doubt on direct relationships between how often stars appeared in the magazine and their popularity with British audiences. Nevertheless, looking at letters—and their comments on such advertising—does allow us to gather a sense of women's engagement with particular stars. There are a handful of early stars who have been the subject of silent film studies—particularly those seen to represent stereotypical twenties types, such as the flappers Clara Bow (Orgeron 2003) and Colleen Moore (Landay 2002; Hastie 2007) and the vamp Pola Negri (Negra 2002; Butler 2002). The critical use of these particular personalities has often been based on their popularity with American audiences, however.

[8.5] In an attempt to approach a fuller understanding of British fans' interaction with female star images, therefore, an initial step has been to record and tally the appearance of individual female actresses in *Picturegoer* across the period under study (1913 to 1928), marking where they feature in pictorial forms (posters, photographs, covers, advertisements) and written forms (interviews, articles, features written by the stars themselves, competitions, fan letters, and poetry). The aim here is to establish a more relevant groundwork upon which to explore the range of feminine types circulating in fan discourse to which British women would have been most exposed and most prone to respond ([note 8](#)).

[8.6] Tracking stars in this way offers a detailed insight into the context in which they regularly appeared. This methodology enables the researcher to explore the significance of results that show how certain stars received next to no formal magazine coverage, yet scored highly purely on the basis of fan writing. Stars like Pola Negri, for example, whom fans speak of as "the finest emotional star on the screen to-day" (December 1924, 102), and Marie Doro—"the spirit of a faery, an angel, an idol" (February 1925, 82)—rarely feature in the official pages of *Picturegoer*, and yet remain in the higher bracket of popular stars, purely based on their continued debate and discussion by contributing fans.



[8.7] Tallies of star appearances in the magazine offer a basic framework for understanding the popularity of female stars among female fans. Of all the stars tallied, 69 percent were American and just 20 percent British. Of the 20 most featured stars, the ratio of American to British was 14:3, and the remaining 3 actresses—Greta Garbo (Swedish), Pola Negri (Polish), and Alla Nazimova (Russian)—were American-based stars by the late teens and twenties. This is in contrast to the featured British actresses, who remained almost exclusively on the British screens, with the exception of Betty Balfour, one of Britain's few successful international actresses.

[8.8] American actresses, therefore, dominated British female fan experience. Industrially, there are several factors that justify this conclusion, such as the perceived failure of the British industry to emulate American production values; the temporary shutdown of all British production in 1924; and American block-booking tactics forcing domestic production from the cinemas.

[8.9] A more detailed exploration of the fan discussion and treatment of the nationality of stars, however, reveals that the British female appreciation for and interaction with American star images was complex. Fan interaction was not simply a matter of embracing the imported personalities of an American-saturated industry, but a relationship that engendered cultural tensions regarding models of female propriety and restraint.

[8.10] The conflict between traditional and new forms of femininity played out in many of the magazine's commercial discourses reverberates within fan discussion of female performances and personas. Stardom and the circulation of star images fed into the disruption of a traditional concept of a gendered public/private divide under threat in this period. The cinema as new public leisure form encouraged the consumption of public female images and the reciprocating display of the female body as an industry whose extratextual discourses relied heavily upon marketing the possibility of imitating star personas.

[8.11] The increasing grandeur of the public cinemagoing experience with the rise of the larger Picture Palaces in the teens also meant that cinemagoing itself was more than ever an opportunity for self-display, fashion, and film-star emulation. The fashion-dominated pages of the fan

magazine supported female-targeted consumer discourses by encouraging fans to publicly flaunt "Mary Pickford curls" (July 1927, 60) and wear star-endorsed cosmetics, promising "what it does for her it will do for you if you would be beautiful and admired" (July 1927, 60).

[8.12] Such activity posed a threat to traditional values dictating women's modesty and restricted urban mobility. The British woman as public spectacle and public consumer was therefore a figure whose precarious transition from private to public acutely played out in the cinematic environment, in which women encountered "idealised images of femininity on screen" (Stacey 1994, 183).

[8.13] These issues were embodied by the image of the female star, who represented female economic power and emancipation divorced from inheritance, class privilege, or marital status—a fact often commented upon in the British press of the era, which was prone to attack what it saw as a new breed of working women free to "revel in unaccustomed luxury and squander their fabulous wage with extravagant recklessness" (Brémont 1917).

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## 9. Problem of British female stardom

[9.1] British female stars in particular problematically exacerbated these debates about modern femininity. Bruce Babington has explored the ways in which British culture in this period—"more tradition-oriented, more class-bound and less materially wealthy" (2001, 19)—was reflected in British models of stardom. Babington argues "the education, the middleclassness of British stars, an intellectual society in which the cinema ranked low beside the theatre...all inclined British stars towards an anti-star inflection of stardom...close to dominant social ideologies" (2001, 20).

[9.2] This "anti-star inflection" is particularly evidenced in *Picturegoer's* conflicting presentation of stars as both consumers and nonconsumers, as echoed in the Irene example. The ease of class ascendance in the rags-to-riches fairytale narratives of many American films, and the vast salaries of American stars with working-class roots, painted a fantasy portrait of modern femininity that was a far cry from British women's everyday experiences of gender inequality and class division. Such films, as one fan puts it, depicted women who, "even when they have been

brought up in the slums" could easily enter society by "putting on an evening dress" (August 1918, 211).

[9.3] Stardom for aspiring British girls was seemingly unattainable in light of the postwar backlash against working women, the British industry's reliance on theatrical performers with middle-class roots, and the more limited opportunities for the domestic promotion of national stars. Fans were thus wont to complain that "anyone with talent and grit has a far better chance of being recognised in America than is the case in England" (August 1918, 178); as a pair of female fans lament in 1919, "girls in America have more chances of becoming cinema actresses than we English girls" (November 1919, 111).

[9.4] Fan writing responded to these debates in the discussion of nationally specific forms of female representation on the screen, revealing conflicting efforts to reconcile notions of the appropriate behavior, appearance, and performance of female screen stars.

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## 10. Costuming

[10.1] Screen costuming and fashion were a frequent focus for fan debates about the differing constructions of British and American stardom and their appeal for women. British trade papers were quick to acknowledge that "dress nowadays has a powerful attraction for most women" (*Bioscope*, October 1921, 45), with cheaper and more physically liberating 1920s clothing trends facilitating universally popular and achievable fashions across different classes of women. Accordingly, fashion was a key element of the film-fan magazine's mediation of female star images.

[10.2] Despite the radical changes in women's dress, many British stars were depicted as avoiding fashion altogether. Alma Taylor in particular (figure 4) was often portrayed as the antithesis of the glamorous American film personality in her choice of simple dress, homemade clothes, and refusal to wear makeup off the screen. Jonathan Burrows has shown how the Taylor star persona, under the tight control of leading British filmmaker Cecil Hepworth, represented an attempt to remain "faithful to certain privileged icons and ideals of British womanhood and local cultural traditions" that "led to a great many discursive

contradictions and ambivalences in the content of...[her] star image" (2001, 31).



**Figure 4.** Alma Taylor on the cover of the December 1918 *Picturegoer*. (Image taken from University of Exeter's Bill Douglas Centre archive, item BDCEXE 21268.) [[View larger image.](#)]

[10.3] Taylor was frequently represented as a star who professed a "complete distaste for the emergent culture of consumerism" (Burrows 2001, 36). This construction of the nonconsumer persona took place particularly in relation to Taylor's clothing and fashion choices ([note 9](#)). This stood in direct contrast to the representation of American stars like Gloria Swanson, who were characterized almost entirely by their indulgence in fashion and consumer goods. Articles with titles such as "Why Gloria Swanson Is Always Broke" and "Gorgeous Gloria" perpetuated the glamorous image of the star. In the former, Swanson explains: "All my salary goes for clothes or furniture. I buy much more expensive clothes than I should; much more expensive than I ever did before" (*Theatre Magazine*, July 12, 1919).

[10.4] A female fan letter from 1918 responds directly to the specific nature of Taylor's persona, reporting a recent sighting of the star:

[10.5] To-day I had a special treat. I attended the Trade Show of a Hepworth film, and at the end of this particular film...I came across the slim figure that I love to see on these occasions. Looking altogether charming in a simple cotton costume came Alma Taylor, passing on her way with a word of greeting here and there to friends and acquaintances. As I watched the figure of the girl who is beloved by thousands of British picturegoers, the account I had read a few days previously occurred to my mind—American enthusiasm and British reserve. Here and there, I caught words of admiration and affections—but for the most part very few appeared to recognize the girl with the dainty, unassuming manner, who obviously preferred not to attract notice...the embodiment of charming, unspoilt British girlhood. (September 1918, 301)

[10.6] Taylor's dismissal of fashion and glamour, opting for a "simple cotton costume" and appearing "dainty" and "unassuming," here garners the respect and admiration of the female film fan. Another *Picturegoer* fan letter similarly praises the actress for her naturalness, exclaiming "Alma Taylor was simply Alma Taylor. How artificial and unreal many of the transatlantic luminaries are beside her!" (April 1920, 402). National reserve is here an asset rather than a hindrance; the quality of Taylor's star persona is measured by an avoidance of self-display.

[10.7] As Burrows notes, however, the coded reserve and restraint of British female costuming was not universally popular with female fans. As ever, fans used the letters page to spur debate, and accordingly, a large number of fan letters condemned the failure of British stars like Taylor to mimic their American counterparts in modern, sophisticated dress and style.

[10.8] A letter from 1920, for example, observed that:

[10.9] English films are handicapped by the very ordinary faces, clothes, style and acting of the English film stars. I witnessed a British play the other evening—a really good film—with plenty of plot and go in it—but oh, dear! The heroine! She was plain to an extent of positive ugliness at times and atrociously dressed and shod, and she was ridiculous at times as to draw forth very uncomplimentary remarks from the young bloods in the cheap seats. (March 1920, 268)

[10.10] For this fan, narrative sophistication is a wasted effort when British films remain unable to cast actresses of appropriate aesthetic star quality to carry such stories. A similar letter from later in the decade rehashes these arguments:

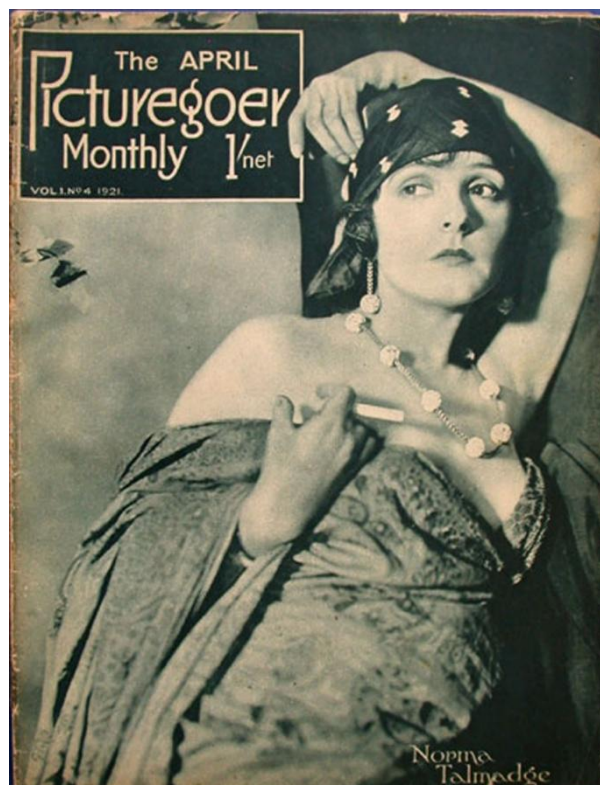
[10.11] Our actresses are the biggest handicap. They may be talented, but they certainly are neither beautiful nor chic. Put an American actress beside an English one, and you can tell at a glance the American, by her clothes and the smart way she has of wearing them. (May 1928, 54)

[10.12] Appearance, performance, and nationality are here inescapably linked, underscoring the inability of British screen stars to fully embrace the aesthetic modernity of both appearance and performance necessary to create successful filmic incarnations.

[10.13] Of the most regularly featured *Picturegoer* stars, few adhere strongly to this conception of the more austere British image. The prominent names—Mary Pickford, Norma Talmadge, Constance Talmadge, Pauline Frederick, Lillian Gish, Clara Kimball Young, Mary Miles Minter, and so on—present an appropriate blend of a more modern offscreen image with a less radical on-screen persona, with stars such as Pickford and Norma Talmadge (figures 5 and 6) praised as "sweet," "pretty," or "dainty" in appearance. This kind of balance seems to have been appreciated by an audience of female fans who would likely have been attempting to reconcile ideas of feminine progress and traditional norms in their own lives. One fan describes Pickford, for example, as "an everyday little person living in a dream" (May 1928, 15).



**Figure 5.** Mary Pickford on the cover of the May 1922 *Picturegoer*. (Image taken from University of Exeter's Bill Douglas Centre archive, item BDCEXE 24196.) [[View larger image.](#)]



**Figure 6.** *Norma Talmadge on the cover of the April 1921 Picturegoer.* (Image taken from University of Exeter's Bill Douglas Centre archive, item BDCEXE 26437.) [[View larger image.](#)]

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11. Performance style: "British reserve" versus "American enthusiasm"

[11.1] Clothing debates tied into issues of national modes of performance. However progressive and modern they might have appeared, female stars were often chastised in fan writing for popularity founded entirely on glamour, wealth, and self-display where it overshadowed acting talent. A letter from 1928, for example, complained:

[11.2] Many of the genuine stars seem to me to be so superficial and lacking in real emotional power: they are wrapped in lip-stick, Marcel Waves, and complexes! (January 1928, 60)

[11.3] Like the Irene letter writer, this writer is aware of the commercial imperative behind star representation in industry and advertising-supported discourses like the fan magazine (here making specific reference to the popular Marcel Wave hair fashion) ([note 10](#)). The blatant commercialization of star images on and off the screen often provoked this kind of frustration.

[11.4] The exotic Pola Negri, for example—"one of the actresses most associated with vamping" (Negra 2002, 374)—attracted fan criticism along these lines. Female fan letters demanded the actress "stop posing and being a fashion plate" (October 1925, 66) and take on less "artificial roles" (September 1925, 66). Gloria Swanson comes under fire continuously for her poor acting. As one fan complained, "the change is only in her gowns, she is the same, always" (September 1925, 66).

[11.5] By privileging acting ability over aesthetic appearance, such letter writers posited performative skill as an essential element of an appealing female star. How women performed for the screen came in for just as much criticism and debate as how they dressed for the screen. A strong value placed on restraint as a discourse of performance—in terms of both performance style and costume style—was a concept that resonated within the British industry, and one that seemingly proved problematic for female stars like Taylor.



[11.6] Chrissie White, another Hepworth star, recalls, for example, how Hepworth "didn't like publicity—we [Hepworth's contract players] weren't allowed publicity at all" (Sweet 2006). Although Hepworth used studio magazines to promote his actresses and their films, none of them were allowed to give interviews or appearances early in their careers, again going against the grain of the American model of stardom more closely aligned with discourses of self-promotion.

[11.7] An advertisement for White's film *Broken Threads* in a 1918 *Picturegoer* is typical of Hepworth's approach. The insert features no images, instead displaying only a small replica of the Hepworth company logo beside a brief block of text on an empty white background, humorlessly explaining: "Chrissie White is one of the Hepworth picture players. She has acted for Hepworth since she was ten years old. Her years of experience help to make her pictures what they are today" (August 2–10, 1918, 185).

[11.8] The restraint and reserve evidenced in Hepworth's approach to advertising was a quality deeply embedded both in the British dramatic tradition and as a wider social norm for British women in this period. Performative restraint, as Christine Gledhill has extensively discussed, is "rarely approved without its contrary, 'power' or 'passion'" in the tradition of British performance (2003, 62). Gledhill argues it is this logic of oppositional values that has long fueled complaints "about the repression of the English character, unable to express feeling" (2003, 63).

[11.9] British theatrical practices still held substantial cultural influence in the early 20th century as a site for "playing out the tensions in British culture between...private emotion and public presentation" (Gledhill 2003, 16), a tension which further placed emphasis upon issues of feminine decorum and self-display. The cinematic reworking of this tradition in female film performance in particular brought the "playing out" of social tensions to the screen as a representation of, and catalyst for, women's increasing physical, social, and urban mobility and visibility. Yet what the cinema called for in acting style was in many ways fundamentally incompatible with the theatrical tradition. Cinema required a mode of performance that broke with the dramatic craft of theater acting in demanding a less mediated representational discourse, tied to the fundamental notion that film stars "did not really act but passively offered

authentic ontological being to the recording apparatus" (Burrows 2001, 33).

[11.10] What was praised and revered on the stage, therefore—reserve, restraint, and representation, rather than simply being; as one fan puts it, screen stars need to "*live*, and not *act* it" (May 1928, 55)—translated awkwardly onto the screen and seemingly proved problematic issues for audiences in their experience of many British female star performances.

[11.11] Such issues run through both criticism and praise of English films by female fans. On one hand, British actresses were applauded for their "dainty unassuming manner" (September 1918, 301) and "British reserve" (September 1918, 301), while on the other they were criticized for being "too restrained" (May 1928, 54), their acting "heavy and labored" (October 1921, 62).

[11.12] The following extract from a *Picturegoer* article late in 1928 entitled "Have We No 'It' Girls?" sides with the latter attitude:

[11.13] The two—personality and reserve—cannot possibly go together for a girl who wants to succeed on the screen. On the stage reserve is an asset. It lends dignity and stateliness. But dignity on the screen does not register as it does on the speaking stage. It makes a beautiful woman appear cold, haughty, unemotional. That is why most of our English screen actresses are often called "dumb." There is proof of this in the fact that Hollywood producers do not favour English girls in their productions...She looks hard and cold on the screen and, of course, that typical English reserve predominates. (December 1928, 39)

[11.14] The British actress was, in the view of many fans, too often unable to navigate this incompatibility between modest British womanhood and the culture of personality that stardom embodied. The negotiation that American stars seemed to achieve appeared to hold greater appeal to British fans and may be one of the reasons for Mary Pickford being the most regularly discussed star within *Picturegoer* letters and poetry, along with the clear dominance of American stars featured in the fan-written content of the magazine.

[11.15] Although the innocence and charm of the Pickford persona played to more typically English norms, seemingly devoid of the aggressive and

sexualized femininity of the more glamorous female stars, her star image overall fully embraced the self-promotion and commodification of her persona. The ratio of images to written material within *Picturegoer*, for example, shows a substantial dominance of pictorial material—portraits, posters, covers—over articles and interviews with the star, while in terms of film performances the number of Pickford films produced in the period under study greatly outweighs those of leading British stars such as Betty Balfour ([note 11](#)).

[11.16] While fan writing retained a shrewd awareness of the constructed, fantastical nature of these prevalent star personas, therefore, the appealing fantasy of screen glamour and sophisticated screen performance style was positively upheld by American stars—some of whom, like Clara Bow, were themselves "picture girl" competition winners, and as such clearly marked as former fans.

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## 12. Conclusion

[12.1] Fan debate suggests that models of feminine behavior, appearance, and personality were not as straightforwardly accepted as either film texts or magazine articles alone might indicate. The debate implies that the cinema offered women an environment in which consumer choice enabled them to build a composite of their own preferred form of contemporary femininity, privileging and discarding aspects of both traditional and progressive womanhood embodied by particular female stars.

[12.2] The popular culture that female fans navigated through their letter writing was not dominated inescapably by a set of determining spectatorial positions of resistance or passivity, but was by its nature a concept, as John Storey surmises, "of ideological contestation and variability, to be filled and emptied, to be articulated and disarticulated, in a range of different and competing ways" (2006, 155).

[12.3] Analyzing fan letters is thus a way of offering greater sensitivity to British women's participation within the "contestation and variability" of popular culture. The sheer variety of fan debate and opinion on display within *Picturegoer* demonstrates that female engagement with silent film culture refused to fall easily upon either side of an active/passive reception binary. The vitality and variety of fan writing would seem to

exceed its status as an ephemeral by-product of commercialized leisure culture.

[12.4] Bringing fan letters to the forefront of archival silent film research, therefore, assists in the writing of women "back into film history" (Hastie 2006, 229) in a manner that gives voice to the diversity of female film culture in this period, highlighting women's awareness of their primary role within popular culture more broadly as engaged consumers, who were capable of debating, contesting, and embracing the female representations they consumed.

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### 13. Notes

1. By 1921, 5,065,332 women (25.6 percent of the female population of Britain; 13.4 percent of the total British population) were employed in the nation's workforce (source: *Whitaker's Almanac* 1941, cited in John Hitchcock, *GenDocs Genealogical Research in England and Wales*, 2005, <http://homepage.ntlworld.com/hitch/gendocs/index.html>).

2. When *Forget-Me-Not* and *Home Chat*'s founder Alfred Harmsworth founded the hugely successful *Daily Mail* in 1896, for example, he insisted upon the inclusion of women's columns and held that the magazine page of the paper "ought to be almost entirely feminine" (LeMahieu 1988, 33).

3. Particularly in its inclusion of numerous short stories and dressmaking patterns, which characterized many working-girl story papers and magazines.

4. A nearly complete run of *Picturegoer* is held on microfiche at Southampton University Hartley Library.

5. Pelmanism was a system of training the mind for greater memory retention popular in the UK in the early 20th century, devised from a memory system developed by William Joseph Ennever in the 1890s and taught via correspondence from the London Pelman Institute.

6. Higher page numbers for *Picturegoer* quotations (generally above 80) relate to instances where individual issues have been accessed via microfiche copies of yearly anthologies of the magazine. These hardback editions were bound volumes containing a year's worth

of *Picturegoer* issues, with page numbers accordingly adjusted to run consecutively from issue to issue.

7. The ability to threaten the industry with the public power to make or break a movie—a fan letter typical of many urges the "kinemagoer" to "wake up to the fact that they alone can operate the machinery which will bring us 'Better Pictures'" (May 1920, 568)—or to insist upon the production of particular types of films, may have less to do with a true desire for reform and more to do with the pleasurable act of voicing such assertions. However inconsequential such fan writing may ultimately have appeared to be, the powerful sensation of threatening the movie producer by setting pen to paper may have been an appealing notion to female viewers.

8. It is important to assert that the statistics drawn from this process give only a very general indication, as factors have to be taken into account concerning the availability of the magazine across the period. One or two individual issues and pages are missing from the collection; the results drawn reflect the most detailed compilation of the magazine available for research.

9. Burrows cites a report on Taylor's fashion habits in *Nash's Pall Mall Magazine* that painted the star as a nonconsumer, reporting that "When Miss Taylor goes to London, which she does very infrequently, it is to do some simple shopping, for her wants are few" ("Alma: A Cinema Genius," May 1915, 328). A similar story in *Pictures and the Picturegoer* reported Taylor's view on fashion: "I'm not frightfully fond of clothes...At home, I enjoy myself in the oldest thing I can find" ("Pink and Periwinkle: An Afternoon's Shopping with Alma Taylor," *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, September 15, 1917, 329).

10. Throughout the 1920s, imported Marcel curling irons (created by Frenchman Francois Rene Marcel) were on sale in the United Kingdom, enabling women to create this fashionable hairstyle. The wave look, created by applying heated curling irons to mold hair into S-shaped curved undulations, became synonymous with the Marcel brand and was hugely popular in the 1920s, with the hairstyle often sported by movie stars.

11. Pickford appeared in some 244 films between 1913 and 1928, compared to Betty Balfour's 23 (figures taken from the Internet Movie Database filmography listings; again, these figures give a general indication drawn from the best available resources).

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