

Archiving star labour: framing Vivien Leigh

In this paper, I want to talk today about the role that the star archive plays in framing, illuminating and obscuring histories of gendered labour, focusing specifically on the transatlantic star Vivien Leigh and her dispersed archival collections. This is a good moment for thinking about Leigh, as Keith Lodwick discussed earlier in the conference. Her star image has been very prominent lately, with the acquisition of a new Leigh archive by the V&A in 2013 (open to the public as of 2014). In the same year, events celebrating her centenary saw renewed press and public attention, and Kendra Bean published a beautiful new illustrated biography. Even more recently, her face has been adorning the walls (interior and exterior) of the British Library as the poster girl for their ‘Shakespeare in Ten Acts’ exhibition. Extracts from the V&A archive are also currently on tour around the UK in the ‘Public Faces, Private Lives’ exhibition, hosted in York this past winter.

Leigh’s archives are nationally and internationally dispersed. Materials related to her life and career can be found in the Harry Ransom Centre in Texas, in the Bristol Old Vic archives, in the British Library, in the V&A Theatre and Performance collections. They are also clustered more locally; in the South West, her dresses and shoes can be found at Exeter’s RAMM museum; her nightdress from *Gone with the Wind* is in the ‘Vivien Leigh Room’ at Topsham museum, along with a host of other personal items.

I want to start two images amidst these collections as a way in to thinking about framing ideas of Leigh and labour through the archive. One is a piece of pop culture ephemera, the likes of which we might find in an ephemera archive like the Bill Douglas Cinema Museum. This wartime cover of *Look Magazine* features Leigh knitting ‘bundles for Britain’. The second image is a handwritten note from the new archive, currently on display in the V&A’s theatre and performance collections. Here, Leigh scribbles an annotation about constructing her role as Blanch Du Bois in the 1951 screen adaptation of *A Streetcar Named*

Desire, asserting that she intended her physical embodiment of the character to look, quote, ‘right, not *good*.’ The piece is one fragment amidst a massive collection of personal and professional materials, gesturing towards Leigh’s understanding of herself as an actress, and her performance as a craft.

The two images offer us different ways into interpreting Leigh, and her relationship with notions of star labour. In the first instance, Leigh is presented as a war time labourer, where her star image functions as propagandistic national symbol. At the same time, the presentation of Leigh’s ‘war work’ gestures outwards from her on-screen image and towards other networks of diverse labours surrounding her role as performer. Materials from Leigh’s archive can offer us a new insight into these networks, which interact with, but also push beyond the more standardised narratives that have surrounded her star image. Bits and pieces from Leigh’s personal correspondence, her scrapbooks and her financial records offer the chance to think about Vivien Leigh the producer, for example, and her work with ‘V.L. Productions Ltd’, as a shrewd investor and business woman.

The new archive also offers material on Leigh’s role as protestor, leading a campaign against the demolition of the St James Theatre in the late 50s. Whilst these activities might be found in Leigh’s biographies, the archive presents them with a sense of immediacy where press clipping describing the events are collated as they happened. A thick folder full of letters from professed ‘ordinary folk’ can be found in the Olivier archive at the British Library written to support Leigh in her campaigning and commend her bravery. A great deal of these come from women, who offer themselves to her as a leader figure, begging her to make use of them in the campaign. The archive thus points to the gendered cultural resonance of this alternative ‘role’ for Leigh beyond the screen.

There are other threads of Leigh’s activities that the archive can tell new stories about... Leigh’ work with costume designers and fashion designers, as Keith highlighted...

Leigh the model, frequenter of *Vogue* in the mid 1930s... Leigh the financier for stage productions ... Leigh the actor-ambassador for the British Council in the late 1940s ... Leigh the charity worker, working with UNICEF in the 1960s ... Also Leigh's role as researcher -- the new archive offers traces of research materials for unmade films and unrealised projects, such as a musical production of *Mata Hari* in 1964 that Leigh was working on with Henri Ren.

Leigh thus emerges from her archives as a multifaceted figure -- business woman, protester, financier, actress -- who might shed new light on the intermedial labours that shaped such transatlantic star careers within the interwar and post-war film industries.

If we return to the note, this gestures towards some alternative ways of understanding Leigh's star 'labour'. In one sense, these kinds of archival fragments document how a star performance is produced *as a work of labour*. This 'production' can be read through traces of that labour in such annotations, letters, diaries and photographs not intended for circulation, but retained within the star archive. In this instance, the construction of star performance is something that Leigh is struggling to position in the right way against her status as glamorous star body. Looking 'good' had both propelled and hindered her career aspirations across her professional life, particular in regards to her desire to be seen as a credible stage performer.

This kind of archival material can tell us not just about the film text as the finished and final product, but about *how* the actress worked and built that performance. Keith Lodwick, speaking recently at a public talk on the new V&A archive, discussed how documents in the collection show Leigh's active, creative role in *Streetcar*, for example, where she asked for additions, changes and restructings in narrative and the character of Blanche, requesting flashback scenes and new dialogue. Traces of her script annotations in the Olivier Archive offer further fragments of her labour in performance.

These traces speak more broadly to the archive's potential to deconstruct the film performance, by mapping out its prehistory as a process of personal and collaborative development and structuring. Fragments of this process might be pieced together through such notations, and further annotated scripts, paper correspondence and phone call transcripts, which can be put into dialogue with the film text and its reception. The archival record of the star performance could thus be interrogated as an alternative kind of 'manuscript draft', illuminating its craft through a range compositional elements.

It is this dual emphasis on the archival image of the star as fashioned and self-fashioning through concepts of labour that I want to consider for the remainder of the paper. Leigh was a performer who worked within the Hollywood and UK film industries in their classical periods, and experienced the restriction of these systems, subject to the shaping and handling of agents, studio bosses, publicist, etc. Anne Helen Peterson suggests in her work on Gloria Swanson's archives that star archives have value precisely because they might offer a rebuttal to the assumption that, given these conditions of labour, stars can be relegated to positions of, quote, 'dupes, or, quite simply, "the product."'

Alternative approaches to star studies by writers such as Barry King and Sean Holmes have pushed to locate film actors in the sphere of production, looking beyond 'the product' to look at the material conditions of star labour within film industries. In the industrial development of commercial cinema, stardom came to portions off a 'special' branch of performers, distinguished from other kinds of actors, with comparatively excessive salaries and publicity. In the process, Holmes argues that, quote, 'by prioritising the image over the image-making process, [the star system] stripped actors of their identity as workers' (99).

Danae Clarke's work has further sought to relocate the star within the sphere of production. The emphasis here is upon, quote, 'the star as a social subject who struggles within the film industry's sphere of productive practices'. This moves beyond a primary

focus on the spectator-image relationship in understanding stardom, and focuses instead on, quote ‘the conditions of labour that produce that image.’ The star archive can offer a space in which traces of how stars have articulated their experiences as ‘workers’, and their movement within and responses to these conditions, can be found.

Leigh is an interesting case study in this regard because she was an actresses whose star image was built around a pull between glamour and work, navigating simultaneously positive and negative ideas of acting as a craft and acting as spontaneous ‘star quality’. The ‘personal glamour’ that Richard Watts speaks of (‘‘That personal glamour of Miss Leigh atones for many a weakness in her playing’ (Richard Watts Jr., *New York Post*, Jul. 8 1958)) was at the *absolute heart* of Leigh’s star image; but it was an obstacle in her efforts to be taken seriously as a working actress. It’s also proved an obscuring entity to some extent in cultural and critical readings of her presence within histories of transatlantic film industries.

As a UK and US film and stage star, whose career traversed the 1930s to the early 60s, Leigh is a figure around whom a number of prominent narratives have been built. The most immediate involves her relationship with Laurence Olivier, and her position within debates about the cultural hierarchies surrounding film and theatre in Britain across the interwar period. Through her working partnership with Olivier, the pair became known as the ‘royal couple’ of British acting, consolidating their star power through theatrical endeavours, tours and, in Leigh’s case, relatively scattered film work (she made 20 films overall). She twice won the academy award for best actress; she suffered quite publicly with mental illness, and she instigated a fan following that extends into the present moment. Leigh the star still generates huge public interest.

Given this, and given precisely her status *AS* a star actress, positioning Leigh in relation to projects of reclamation and visibility for women’s film history might seem less pressing. Screen stardom as *THE* historical image of women and cinema of course obscures

and occludes women's other creative and professional roles; and focusing on Leigh might seem participant in this. But the star archive can be used to reframe stardom on different terms, ones that give greater scope for repositioning even extremely prominent stars like Leigh within these projects of reclamation. In one sense, this can come through refocusing on the status of stars as workers within an industrial system, as I've suggested. There is another way to consider this in focusing more directly on the archive itself and *considering the labour of* archiving, and the processes of gendered self-fashioning that come through this.

I suggested earlier that the 'right, not good' note is distinguished from the fan magazine because it was never intended to be exhibited and 'read' – yet its retention and placement within her collections would seem to suggest a desire to foreground her professional craft for future 'spectators' of her archive. By retaining and curating to some extent their own collections (which can later go on to become major 'official' archives like the V&A collection), stars like Leigh pattern and fashion a history -- not just of their star image -- but of their craft and labour, forming a record of their professional practice, as much as of their private lives. Whilst this happens in both direct and indirect collaboration with others – personal secretaries and assistants responsible for scrapbooking, and later the ordering and curation of the archive as it is received by archival institutions – the archive is still accessible as a story about a star actresses' labour as unofficial archivists and as curators of their own careers. Stars like Leigh who DID retain an archive build a future 'reading' of their own star image through processes of preservation and collection, and building and editing personal archives.

Leigh's V&A archive is quite uniquely comprehensive, with some 10K items. Keith Lodwick has suggested that Leigh seemed to have consciously kept everything together in one place. The stories that initially emerge the new archive will perhaps inevitably repeat, amplify, and give weight to particular discourses about the female film performer and her

cultural value, led by the sustained interest in Leigh's glamorous star image. A *Guardian* article in February of last year, for example, offered a first little expose of the letters contained in the new archive, focusing on Leigh's 'steamy' relationship with Olivier. Her archived letters were fed back into affirming a wider romantic narrative of Britain's 'royal couple' and their great love affair, whilst adding a bit of scandalous 21st century sexuality. One of the new archive's most immediate and obvious promises is to supple this kind of tabloid-inflected gossip.

The public presentation and display of the new archive works with and against this in different ways. The title of the V&A touring exhibition speaks to the huge interest in her private life, but its curator has asserted its desire to focus on, as we've heard, 'her professional rather than romantic career.' It does this in fascinating ways by profiling her work on *Gone with Wind*, her work with fashion photographers and designers, charting the progress of her career, as well as offering a wealth of personal material about her life pre stardom. As it does so, the exhibition simultaneously foregrounds objects that fetishize the star body in its absence. Displayed dresses and costumes in particular offer the tangible echo of her present/absent star body within the space.

The exhibition brochure also features a quotation from Gladys Cooper, claiming that Leigh 'should be in a museum, for history's sake, as the famous beauty of the English stage.' The inclusion of this line reinforces that pervasive sense of Leigh's body as a beautiful aesthetic object as her primary source of value and of meaning making, and something that ought to be captured, pinned down, exhibited and preserved: a composite of her physical beauty documented in moving image and photograph, and her glamorous off-screen image in the extensive personal snap shots and guest books from her lavish parties, which you find scattered around the exhibition.

Anita Helle, writing on the archive of Sylvia Plath, speaks of, quote ‘a structure of representation that perpetually crosses corpse and corpus, the body of the woman and the body of the writing.’ Understandings and uses of Plath’s archive have given rise to the impression of, quote ‘a woman *buried* in her manuscripts’, characterising her archive as a place of both embodiment and intention. Literary archives promise an access point to the ‘bodies’ and subjectivities of authors via their ‘bodies of work’. For film stars, obviously this doesn’t translate in the same way; they are rarely easily identified as the ‘authors’ of the collaborative texts to which they contribute. ‘Corpse’ is also obviously SO much more prominent, because we are dealing with a *performer*, not a writer, whose body of work rests very literally ON that body, not on a collation of creative, singularly authored compositions. For Leigh, however, ‘corpse and corpus’ intertwine in particular ways where the archiving and display of her ‘body of work’ – via letters, costumes, photographs, diaries and scripts – are collated, preserved and displayed in seeming compensation for the absence of the star body as the spectacle of objectified, glamorous beauty that structured her star image, and still structures much of her appeal.

The concept of performance as ‘work’ was one which had a significant impact on Leigh’s star image and the reception of that image. Kendra Bean, speaking of Leigh’s detractors, notes that many were, quote, ‘quick to point out her *learned* rather than natural acting abilities.’ The ‘star’ label was always problematic for her, insofar as it obscured her frequently professed desire to be seen as an artist and an *actress*, and her ambitions to be taken seriously for her performances, and not just her beauty. George Cukor summarised her in these terms when he now rather famously described her as, quote, ‘a consummate actress hampered by beauty.’

Exploring Leigh’s documentation, letters and correspondence across her archives suggests a woman who worked extremely hard at her craft, in the process grappling with the

simultaneously profitable and problematic reduction of her value to her status as glamorous star body. In her papers in the British Library, press clipping scrapbooks paint a portrait of a star whose skills are always framed in deference, unsurprisingly, to her physical beauty. I've offered you some examples here on the slide from reviews of her early British films:

‘Vivien Leigh [...] proves to be exquisitely lovely without as yet suggesting any profounder talent than that shared by a hundred equally lovely young ladies.’

(*Amateur Theatre* 12 March 1937)

‘She looks attractive, but I'm afraid she does not repeat her stage success on the screen, and this impression is not lessened by comparison with the polished skill of Gracie Fields’

(*Daily Mirror* 2 Aug 1935)

‘She is very attractive, but her characterisation here did not strike me as being anything out of the way.’

(*Liverpool Weekly Post* 10 Aug 1935)

Not all her early press was negative, much praise also is offered for her acting – but her ‘loveliness’ and her talent are opposed in these accounts, instigating a longstanding tension between ‘natural gift’ and *learned labour* in her star image.

These are press accounts I could have found outside the archive if I'd used any of major newspaper repository. But they reside in scrapbook form in Leigh's own archive: these critiques of her talent are things she *chose* to retain. The Leigh archive thus presents this narrative to us; it gives us the criticism, whilst offering the ‘counter argument’ in other material, which contribute to its larger image of Leigh's star labour.

The idea of Leigh's ‘hard graft’ was a big part of the narrative that was created by David O Selznick to support and endorse her casting as Scarlet O'Hara in *GWTW*. Reports frequently related her exhaustion, and the extremes she pushed herself to in making the best

performance she could, labouring to 'be' Scarlet. Beyond the press material, the archive offers more. There is a wonderful little black and white shot of Leigh on set of *GWTW* in the Olivier papers at the BL. The image literally constructs a 'portrait' of a labouring star, but on Leigh's own terms. It shows a grimy looking Leigh in a tattered Tara costume, slumped in a chair with a cloth in her hands, raised eyebrows, looking determined. She's written P.T.O in the bottom right hand corner, and written on the reverse: quote: 'Picture of a v dirty girl – this is how your "celestial" one looks in the remains of "Tara" just before going to see Rhett in Goal! (made with my camera)'. Here, her body is tool and testament to her graft, amidst the flirtatious exchange. The spectacle of her performance as 'hard work' was used as a way to sell the scale and grandeur of the picture, and to detract from criticism against her casting; but it also gives value to the star performance *as* work here in the snapshot's retention within her archive.

The archive offers materials that push against the fetishized and petrified image of Leigh as beautiful museum 'object'. Earlier I spoke about the idea of star archives as a kind of manuscript draft. There are other ways to make connections between how literary archives are constructed and critical received, and how the star archive can function. In literary terms, the archived manuscript draft can and has been used to foreground the labour of compositional poetic or prose process, counteracting (or at least complicating) the romantic notion of poetic genius and inspiration 'divinely' sprung from the writer's head. Adapting this focus to emphasise the film star's *labour* is an alternative way into the film archive, and potentially a way to drive a wedge into the formulation of screen star charisma as a gift that cannot be learned. This idea was wielded against Leigh to ridicule her efforts to improve her acting craft (most famously by theatre critic Kenneth Tynan), and served to obscure and diminish the value of that labour, reducing her to glamorous body alone. Traces of the 'manuscript draft' of her labour in performance – be this building a role, or preparing the

physical details of a role, tell a counternarrative seemingly more greatly invested of agency and self-fashioning.

For Leigh, therefore, notions of 'labour' go to the heart of her star image in ways that the star archive might reveal and complicate. If this is a significant 'moment' for Leigh, that moment might make new moves towards complicating and enriching her own prominent star image, but also using Leigh as a case study for considering what new narratives star archives might offer us in understanding gendered labour in film history: in Leigh's case, as performer, as business woman, but also as herself 'archivist.'