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The 'New Woman', star personas, and cross-class romance films in 1920s America

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The popular cross-class romance films of the 1920s were influenced by two socio-cultural developments: the 'New Woman', particularly in the form of the flapper, and the diffusion of the norms of disinterested love within the context of consumerism. The personas of the three female stars discussed here – Mary Pickford, Colleen Moore and Clara Bow – represented variations of the 'New Woman'. Mary Pickford combined rebellion against, and continuity with, Victorian norms of femininity. Colleen Moore balanced a fun-loving flapper image with sexual reticence. Clara Bow represented the sexually assertive and alluring flapper. All three stars were heroines in cross-class romance films and their personas informed the variations in the plots of those films, but their personas were all accommodated to disinterested love, a norm that confirmed that the freedoms of the New Woman were confined within a class system linked to gender.

Keywords: romance; consumerism; flapper; cross-class; stars; personas

Richard Dyer (1979, 1986) has argued that star images function to resolve or manage contradictions within and between ideologies prevalent in society. Film star personas have always been implicated in gender, and Gaylor Studlar (1996, p. 250) has noted that the constructions of gender in the American films of the 1920s attempted to mediate between archetypal new and old social/sexual identities. Many female star personas of the 1920s were linked to the contradictions and conflicts between the passive, innocent Victorian ideal and the 'New Woman', especially the scandalous flapper. The personas were conveyed both by the stars' roles and performances in their films and by non-filmic texts of promotion, publicity and criticism, especially those found in film or fan magazines and newspapers.

There were star personas that expressed just one side of the contradictions and suppressed the other. The ideal image of the fragile, pious, domestic, and sexual innocent was already dated prior to World War I, but it continued to be represented in films, such as those of D.W. Griffith in the persona of Lillian Gish, during and after World War I. In strong contrast was the sexually exploitative vamp, most famously associated with the star persona of Theda Bara. The vamp was usually a woman from the middle or upper-middle class who used her sexual powers to drain male energy, and in the 1920s she was largely

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replaced by the image of the 'gold digger', often from the lower class, who used her sexuality for material gain. Although the passive, sexual innocent and the vamp continued to appear on the screen, as the foci of major screen personas they were replaced in the 1920s by stars whose personas reconciled conflicting notions of femininity and straddled different classes. In both their films and their off-screen biographies the major female stars provided models of New Women who crossed class boundaries and moved from poverty to riches.

When the star's role in a film was from the working class the plot frequently focused on a cross-class romance, a plot which was particularly common in films from the First World War through the early 1930s. It is on the cross-class romance films and their relationship to star personas that this article will focus. An analysis of the films demonstrates how the personas of the stars provided representations, in various forms and degrees, of the socially mobile New Woman, how these personas were accommodated to the interlinked norms of consumerism and disinterested love, and how the New Woman was contained within a gendered class system.

The 'New Woman', class, and consumerism

The term 'New Woman' began to be used in the 1890s to characterize middle to upper-middle class women who were engaged in educational, political, and occupational pursuits outside the home. Around the turn of the century, the New Woman encompassed women with a college education, suffragettes, reformers for social justice, and women who remained single in order to pursue careers. From about 1910 the term 'feminism' came into use and often became synonymous with new womanhood which, in addition to economic independence and equal rights, now encompassed a more radical stance of sexual liberation and fulfillment (Smith-Rosenberg 1985, pp. 176–177, Cott 1987, pp. 3–4).

Prior to World War I, it was taken for granted that the New Woman was restricted to the middle and upper classes. One of the major interests of the middle-class reformers among the New Women was the wage-earning woman, especially the young, unmarried woman who had moved away from the family home. The reformers considered the wage-earning women as innocent victims of economic and sexual exploitation in an industrial, urban environment beset with dangers for the unprotected (Meyerowitz 1988, p. 117). Such concerns were largely replaced among the New Women of the 1920s in favor of their own individual fulfillment, and although there were social reformers among the New Women of the 1920s, their critique was focused on the sexual division of labor and the need to reduce dependency on men by combining marriage with gainful employment (Scharf 1980, pp. 20–28). The media now gave little attention to these reformers and focused instead on those New Women who were characterized by their consumerism and sexual expressiveness.

Gender was one of the most significant factors that shaped consumer demand and since, from the late nineteenth century, the consumer was frequently represented as a woman (Felski 1995), the heightened consumerism of the 1920s was bound to focus the interlinked discourses of consumerism and sexuality on women (Cott 1987, pp. 172–174). The New Woman type that most closely signaled the relationship between consumerism and women's emancipation in appearance and behavior was the flapper. An invention of the 1910s, the flapper became a symbol of the Jazz Age 1920s and a focus of the period's discourse on manners and morals. With her short hair, use of cosmetics, smoking, short skirts, and flamboyant dancing, the flapper was seen to personify a lifestyle condemned by conservatives as undermining morality and religion (Latham 2000, Zeitz 2006).

The changes in women's fashion in the 1920s were understood by contemporaries to indicate a more profound change in women's behavior, but historians have argued that the degree of change has been exaggerated. An argument has been made for a major shift in manners and morals with respect to women in the 1910s, and others have pointed to antecedents of what came to be seen as flapper behavior among certain sectors of American women in the 1890s and 1900s (McGovern 1982, Banner 1983, p. 195, Steel 1985, pp. 213, 236–237, Peiss 1989). However, liberal commentators in the 1920s adopted the popularized image of the flapper as part of their formulation of what Christina Simmons, following Foucault, has called 'the myth of Victorian repression'. For the sexual revisionists of the 1920s the flapper embodied the notion of a free and sexually vital woman, a companion of men who, unlike the negative images of Victorian women, did not seek to limit contact with men or control their sexuality. The flapper's sexuality was not perceived as overpowering men; she was soft and romantic, and although she viewed her paid work as a sign of her independence, she did not seek a career that would require her to forgo marriage (Simmons 1989).

The flapper and the general shift from sexual reticence to sexual expressiveness were associated with the middle, especially upper-middle, class. However, the wage-earning women who lived apart from their families appear to have been a vanguard in the decline of strict sexual standards. The pre-World War I reformers' discourse of innocent, helpless wage-earning women in an evil environment was replaced after the war by one of resourceful women who had freed themselves from the constraints of their families, succeeded in supporting themselves on low wages, and sought amusements in the new forms of commercialized entertainment, including the movies. In some respects, young flappers from the middle class imitated working-class girls who lived on their own or with their peers and socialized freely with men (Meyerowitz 1988, pp. xxii–xxiii, 117–125). Many working-class girls in turn adopted the flapper image, which for them was an expression of class aspiration as much as a statement of personal freedom. Stylish clothes and the use of cosmetics were presented by the new forms of advertising as means of empowerment and self-improvement, and they were simply necessary for women who wished to obtain employment in offices or as sales clerks in department stores.

Although prior to World War I many working-class women had asserted their independence by entering the public leisure spaces of the new commercialized entertainments (Peiss 1986), they were rarely referred to as 'New Women'. From World War I this designation came to evoke a wider range of women that cut across class boundaries (Todd 1993, pp. 1–3, 24–25). The extension of the phrase was related, in part, to the changes that had occurred and were occurring in the employment of women. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of working women, particularly single working women, increased considerably, and although the proportion of women in the total labor force hardly changed, there were significant changes in their occupational distribution. There was a growth of women's employment in the lower ranks of white-collar work, from 17% of working women in clerical and sales in 1910 to 30% in 1920. By 1930 there were almost two million women employed as secretaries, typists and file clerks and another 70,000 as saleswomen (Chafe 1991, pp. 65–71).

The role of a salesgirl in a department store became an especially popular one among stars in the late 1920s. Saleswomen were paid less than clerical workers and they worked long hours in difficult working conditions, often under rigid discipline (Benson 1986, pp. 134–138, 181–187), but such factors were largely ignored by films in which the department stores were used as locations of consumerism and romance. As poor working girls located at the center of consumer culture, the salesgirl provided an ideal screen role

for the stars to represent a working-class New Woman who transcended the barriers of class. In real department stores managers were trying through training and discipline to erase the signs of their salesgirls' working-class origins and to apply the veneer of middle-class culture (Benson 1986, pp. 5, 131, 230). In film department stores the star in the role of the salesgirl showed that, as a New Woman, the girl with a working-class background could win the upper-class man by remaining her 'natural' self.

The identification of many women in white-collar work as middle-class had been encouraged by mass production and the increased standardization of clothes, which had partially democratized fashions and made it difficult, according to contemporary observers, to distinguish affluent middle-class women from secretaries or saleswomen. However, the chances for white-collar girls to achieve a middle-class income and style of life were small and they had good reason to believe that they could only realize their middle-class aspirations, if at all, through marriage. Most unmarried white-collar women from all classes said that they preferred marriage over a career and regarded their work as a temporary state in their lives prior to marriage. The critique of marriage that had been common among feminists prior to World War I was rarely heard after it as it was undercut by the proponents of 'companionate marriage'. More women were getting married, they were marrying younger, and it was entirely rational for them to perceive their economic positions to be dependent on the men they married (Scharf 1980, p. 41, Cott 1987, pp. 147–149, 156–160, 189–191). However, in accord with the norm of disinterested love, it was inappropriate for a woman to consider a man's socio-economic position when choosing a mate.

Disinterested love

The ideal of disinterested love developed together with the link between romance and consumerism. It has been promoted since the early twentieth century as love was increasingly equated with personal happiness and the affirmation of the self. Love in the nineteenth century had more often been represented as a dangerous emotion with tragic consequences, and marriage had been viewed principally as an economic transaction. Love was now ideally free of economic considerations, but its pursuit was conducted within and through the conditions and means provided by the consumer society. More particularly it was conducted through the new institution of dating which was intimately tied to consumerism (Bailey 1988).

Romantic love was presumed to cut across and transcend class divisions, and dating appeared to offer greater possibilities for class mingling. It was evident that working-class men lacked the means to buy the expensive goods deemed necessary for the ideal-typical romance, and with the continued restraints on the occupational mobility of women, it was clear that a woman had to make a good marriage if she was going to partake of the joys of consumerism (Illouz 1997). Marriage into riches was the prize awarded to many of the working-class heroines (who were far more numerous than working-class heroes) of cross-class romances. However, the theme of disinterested love took central place in the romances that led to marriage or at least the promise of marriage. Money and social status were not supposed to interfere with the romantic sentiment, and choosing a partner solely on these grounds was presented as improper (Sharot 2010).

The variations in the cross-class romance plots with respect to disinterested love were linked to representations of the films' heroines, from the heroines who retained characteristics of the ideal Victorian woman to the different types of New Woman, including the flapper (on the range of silent movie heroines see Higashi [1978] and Ryan [1982]). In those cross-class romance films starring film stars with already established

personas, the variations in the representations of the heroines were, in turn, linked to the stars' personas. Three female stars who appeared in cross-class romance films will be considered here: Mary Pickford, Colleen Moore, and Clara Bow. Special attention will be given to four films that were distributed in 1926–1927 when all three stars had recognized personas: *My best girl* with Mary Pickford, *Irene* and *Orchids and ermine* with Colleen Moore, and *It* with Clara Bow. In all of these films the stars played working girls in major venues of consumerism – department stores, the fashion business, and luxury hotels.

Mary Pickford

Film historians have differed in their emphases on the facets of Mary Pickford's star persona. Lary May (1980, pp. 119–126) emphasizes how Pickford's film roles represented a fundamental break from the Victorian conceptions of girls and women. He notes that, in her earliest years as a film actress under D.W. Griffith, Pickford played traditional Victorian heroines, emphasizing purity and dependency on males. After she left Griffith, Pickford's heroines, including her young girl and adolescent roles, displayed feistiness, rebelliousness and independence, elements which the Victorians had repressed. Her wide range of roles included girls who faked a pregnancy to protect another (*Tess of the storm country*, 1914), and having an illegitimate child (*Hearts adrift*, 1914). Gaylyn Studlar (2001), in comparison, interprets the Pickford persona as infused with Victorian values and as an alternative to the sexually assertive New Woman and flapper which became prominent in the 1920s. Although the feisty girls played by Pickford rebelled against Victorian norms of feminine refinement, they were not overtly sexualized and did not present a challenge to gender distinctions regarding sexuality.

Pickford was one of a number of female stars during the teens with a physically childlike image, and she achieved her major stardom by playing adolescents and childlike women before she appeared as a pre-adolescent child in *The poor little rich girl* (1917). The films in which Pickford played sexually active full-grown women, such as *Mistress Nell* (1915), in which she played Nell Gwynne, and *Madame Butterfly* (1915) were heavily costumed historical dramas and set in foreign lands. When she played an American, Pickford was more typically from the working or poor class, 'an urban guttersnipe, half savage, half angel, dressed in tatters, living from hand to mouth, untamable'. She was an angel with a dirty face whose courage, perspicacity, and good heart were rewarded by the discovery of wealthy relatives or the love of a decent, wealthy man (Higashi 1978, pp. 43–47, Whitfield 1997, p. 123, Brownlow 1999).

Pickford played a pre-adolescent girl in only seven of her 52 feature films (Tibbets 2001), but the enormous success of the films in which she played a child made the child role an integral part of her star persona. It has been suggested that the enormous popularity of Pickford in her little-girl roles arose from nostalgia for an idealized innocent age that was no more. A somewhat less generous interpretation is provided by Studlar (2001) who speculates that Pickford's masquerade as a child may have provided a more acceptable erotic object to men who felt threatened by sexually assertive flappers. For many women and girls who wished to assert their independence but who felt uncomfortable with the new sexuality, Pickford provided a 'comforting "asexual" figure of freedom' (Higashi 1978, pp. 48–49). May (1980, p. 125) does not address the question of sexuality in Pickford's persona as directly as Studlar, but he acknowledges that, although the Pickford persona was not prudish, it was sexually innocent (see also Basinger 1999, p. 44). It was not until Pickford made her first sound film, at the age of 36, that she broke away from the star persona that she had cultivated in the silent period. In *Coquette* (1929) she plays a

flirtatious flapper, her hair is styled in a bob of light curls, and she wears a low-cut evening gown. She continued to play a woman with a sex life in her three last films, but in this new persona Pickford could not compete with the new stars and she retired from films.

For many years, Pickford's girlish persona was reinforced off-screen by the prominent presence of her mother who chaperoned her and acted as her moral guardian. In public, Pickford wore demure clothes and she did not drink or smoke (Whitfield 1997, p. 128). Pickford's persona was not damaged by her divorce from Owen Moore and marriage to Douglas Fairbanks who also divorced in order to marry her. There was some criticism of their behavior, but criticism was soon drowned by the public celebration of a couple who appeared perfectly suited to each other and radiated happiness. Pickford said that she and Fairbanks led 'just an old fashioned sort of life' (deCordova 1990, p. 123). Their home, Pickfair, 'resembled an innocent doll's house' (May 1980, p. 145), and their lifestyle was mindful of the proprieties. Dinners at Pickfair were alcohol-free, somewhat formal affairs, and dances were waltzes or the two-step rather than the 'jazz' type (Whitfeld 1997, pp. 225–271). In 1922, in response to scandals involving stars, *Photoplay* enjoined the stars to behave themselves and singled out Pickford as the best example for them to follow (deCordova 1990, p. 124).

The role of a stock-girl in a department store in *My best girl* was a departure for Pickford. The films that Pickford made immediately prior to it were more typical of her *oeuvre*: as a young girl in *Sparrows* (1927), a story of mistreated orphans; as a tomboy of the tenements in *Little Anne Rooney* (1925); and as the heroine of the costume dramas *Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall* (1924) and *Rosita* (1923). As the 1920s progressed Pickford became increasingly aware that, although her fans adored her in her little girl and adolescent roles, her image and appearance, with her long skirts and long hair with golden curls, was seen by many as increasingly old-fashioned. Pickford had become the most popular star in film history, but her stardom had passed its peak and she had been overtaken in the box office by stars, such as Colleen Moore, who represented the New Woman, particularly in the form of the flapper. In 1925 Pickford asked readers of *Photoplay* to suggest possible screen roles, adding that she did not want to be in costume pictures, 'but only those dealing with the problems of the average American girl'. She did not heed the answers of her fans, who suggested such roles as Cinderella, Anne of Green Gables, Alice in Wonderland and Heidi (Eyman 1990, p. 162, Whitfield 1997, p. 241), but chose instead a role that was closer to the roles played by Colleen Moore who had overtaken Pickford as the number-one box office attraction.

My best girl provided a setting of consumerism, but it is significant that Pickford played a stock-girl rather than a salesgirl and that the store was of the 'five-and-ten-cent' type rather than one catering to higher socio-economic strata. A distinction had now been made in department stores between the shopgirl and the saleswoman. The shopgirl was characterized as unskilled and poorly educated, often from a lower-class immigrant background. In contrast there was the newly professionalized saleslady, and a number of middle-class, college-educated women had been persuaded to enter this work. The shop-girl was increasingly relegated to backstage jobs in bargain stores (Benson 1981, Todd 1993, pp. 244, 247–250), and it was the shopgirl rather than the saleswoman that was appropriate to Pickford's star persona.

Pickford had already appeared in films with a focus on cross-class romance, but their settings and narratives were very different from that of *My best girl*. In *The eternal grind* (1916), a lost film, she played a sewing machine operator who attracts the boss's son who helps her to influence his father to improve the conditions of the workers. The film apparently included realistic images of sweatshop factory conditions and tenement life, but

it was criticized at the time for its implausible plot (Brownlow 1999, pp. 120–121). The film is an example of what Steven Ross (1998, pp. 48–55) has called the 'social problem' film which often focused on the inhumane working conditions of women and children, the weaker sectors of the working class. The cross-class romance theme was presented in a much lighter vein in *Amarilly of Clothes-Line Alley* (1918), but in this film the cross-class romance makes little progress. The settings of the film are not those of consumerism, and the film confirms that happiness for the working-class girl was to be found within her own class. Almost a decade later in *My best girl* (1927), in the consumerist setting of the department store, disinterested love overcomes class obstacles. Throughout most of the film Maggie, the Pickford character, is unaware that her co-worker, Joe the stock-boy, is the son of the owner.

Pickford's most successful films had been those in which she played the sweet, innocent, lovable little girl who endears herself even to the hard-hearted, and whose spirited initiative overcomes all obstacles. Shorn of her long dangling curls, Pickford in *My best girl* plays a young woman rather than a child, but she appears in the first scene looking little different from many of the poor adolescent roles of her earlier films. We are first shown her legs and feet in dirty stockings and worn shoes, overloaded with pans which she keeps dropping, and having her petticoat fall. She is, however, the only level-headed and responsible member of her otherwise dysfunctional family. Her father lacks authority, her mother leaves the dirty dishes in order to enjoy herself at funerals where she can have a good cry, and her sister is a floozy with a boyfriend in trouble with the police. Their ramshackle, untidy house is in contrast to the luxurious, tastefully furnished house of Joe's parents who are represented as distinguished and reserved.

At no point in *My best girl* does the Pickford character show any interest in wealth. Her desire is for a simple family life which is demonstrated when she looks with Joe in a shop window displaying a middle-class family seen sitting in a lounge with a sign – 'You Furnish the Girl, We Furnish the Home'. Maggie's response is: 'It must be wonderful to spend an evening like that after supper'. Maggie's absence of cultural capital is demonstrated in a scene in Joe's house in which she shows her lack of table etiquette, but this is unimportant to Joe whose appreciation of her fine qualities are reinforced when, following her discovery of his identity, he witnesses her successful plea to a judge to free her sister from a charge. After Joe's father tells Maggie that her marriage to Joe could ruin his career, she attempts to sacrifice her love by pretending to Joe that she was only after his money. She smears lipstick on her mouth, tries to puff a cigarette, and dance to the record 'Red hot mama'. Joe and his father look on, recognizing that it is only an act, and Maggie finally breaks down, stating her love for Joe.

Colleen Moore

Colleen Moore became a major star when, beginning with the film *Flaming youth* (1923), she played exuberant, lighthearted flappers. Between 1917 and 1923 she had played a variety of roles in some 30 films, including a number of waifs, pre-sexual children or gamin roles similar to those of Mary Pickford. She had become a well-known featured player, but it was Moore's flapper roles that enabled her to became, according to film exhibitors, the top female attraction of 1926 and 1927 (Negra 2001, p. 46). Moore was the wholesome flapper with the boyish look: flat-chested, hair cut short and straight, and wearing short skirts and low-heeled shoes. Her flapper characters were liberated in appearance and in social behavior, but there was no suggestion of sexual allurement or that she would act immorally.

Moore's persona in her flapper period included the New Woman's liberation from Victorian restrictions. Her characters danced the Charleston, smoked in public and drank cocktails, behaviors which, as Moore herself put it, nice girls had not done before (Landay 2002, p. 228). However, the temporary independence and limited sexual experimentation of her characters were always confined within the traditional forms of romance and marriage. Moore's flapper films followed the formula of almost all flapper films of the 1920s: a previously reserved girl seeks out and experiences to some degree a freedom-loving lifestyle, and after escaping the sexual advances of an undesirable man she abandons the lifestyle to settle down in marriage with an appropriate partner. Although some of Moore's flapper films included daring elements in their plots, Moore's comic performance style distanced her from any implication of illicit sexuality. The comic tone indicated that her 'bad' behavior was a masquerade of a basically 'good' girl. She was a safe flapper who appealed not only to young would-be flapper spectators but also to their parents (Ross 2000, 2001).

Moore's persona provided a bridge between the spunky child/woman, pretty but sexually reticent, persona of Pickford and the sexually outgoing persona of Clara Bow. Prior to her screen test for her first flapper role, Moore cut her long, curly hair into a Dutch bob, an act which distanced her from the Pickford component of her persona. However, as one contemporary journalist observed, Moore was a flapper 'who contrives to disguise her flapperish appeal with the sweetness of the eternal maiden' (quoted in Zeitz 2006, p. 233). That Moore's persona during her flapper period was not a complete departure from that of Pickford was indicated by the manufacture of dolls designed in Moore's likeness. Turning Moore into a doll gave her the image of a child, an image that was invoked by some of her earlier film roles, and this association was strengthened when Moore's doll collecting and dollhouse construction and furnishing became well-known in the late 1920s (Hastie 2001).

In the presentation of her persona off-screen, Moore provided a model for how a flapper should look and how a conventional woman should behave. An array of cosmetic products, including lipstick, perfume, and compacts, were manufactured with the Colleen Moore imprint and designed with a shamrock to signify her Irish heritage (Negra 2001). She advised her fans, however, not to exaggerate in applying beauty products, and in interviews she presented herself as subservient to her husband and as a woman who tried to be a model housewife (Zeitz 2006, p. 235). Thus, although Moore was packaged as the typical flapper and was tagged 'The Modern Girl', these representations were countered by emphases on her virtuous behavior, her modesty, and, finally, her domesticity.

Unlike her flapper films, in which Moore played the daughter of upper-middle-class parents, the cross-class romance films required that Moore play a character from a poor or working-class background. Moore's character in the film *Irene* (1926) is the daughter of a poor Irish family living in a tenement building. After scenes that establish her awkwardness, naivety and innocence, Irene attracts Donald, the son of a wealthy family when she delivers curtain samples to their mansion. From this point the film's narrative relates, at first comically and later in a more serious glamour mode, the transformation of a poor Irish girl into a woman who can be accepted in the rich WASP family. We are shown little of the training by which Irene is successfully transformed into a model, and the film advances to an extended fashion fête sequence, shot in two-color Technicolor, in which Irene, the center of the fête, models the clothes with poise and grace. In earlier scenes, Irene had satirized the behavior of the upper class by imitating the affectations of Donald's fiancée, and, by her antics, had made fun of fashion. She now appears as a society girl and as a model who epitomizes the glamour of fashion.

Although Irene has undergone successful glamorization she remains a modest girl with no aspirations to be part of the upper class. Back at the tenement, sitting on the fire escape and unaware that Donald is present and listening in the apartment, Irene admits to her mother that she loves him and laments that he is not 'an iceman or a motorcycle cop'. After hearing this statement of disinterested love, Donald reveals his presence and the film ends with the couple embracing.

Moore's character in *Irene* displays no ambition for class mobility, and her transformation into a woman suitable as a wife for a rich WASP is accomplished, despite her awkwardness and mishaps, by the financial clout of the rich WASP. In comparison with Irene, Colleen Moore's character in *Orchids and ermine*, Pinki, articulates her desire for wealth at the beginning of the film. Working as a clerk in a shack of a cement company, she looks out enviously at a wealthy woman seated in a car wearing fine clothes, and she states to a young black girl: 'Some day I'll quit the cement yard, marry a millionaire, and you'll be my maid'. In reply to a proposal from a worker she says: 'The man I marry may get me dusty, but it'll be gold dust'. Despite this and similar wisecracks, Pinki has neither the appearance of, nor does she act like, a gold digger, and the strategy of the film is to show that a Colleen Moore character, whatever she might say, could only conform to disinterested love and thereby be awarded by wealth.

The Moore persona is evident when Pinki applies for a job as a switchboard receptionist in a luxury hotel on 5th Avenue and gets the job because, unlike the other applicants, she is dressed plainly and the boss does not want any 'chiffon girls'. Her character is juxtaposed with Ermintrude, who is employed by the hotel to sell flowers in its lobby. Ermintrude dresses in a crude imitation of the rich and boasts of a millionaire friend who takes her out in a Rolls Royce when, in fact, he is a chauffeur. It is Ermintrude who uses her charms on a guest of the hotel whom she believes is Richard Tubor, an heir to an oil fortune when in fact he is Tubor's valet. The real Tubor swaps his identity with his valet during his stay at the hotel in order to avoid 'money-mad women'. Tubor falls for Pinki and, unaware that he is rich, Pinki decides 'that a poor girl can be happy, but a happy girl isn't poor'. Pinki is even happier when she is persuaded by Tubor that he is rich and he buys her 'Real Orchids, Real Ermine', but she demonstrates her disinterested love yet again when he is mistakenly arrested as an imposter: 'Couldn't you see it was you I wanted, not clothes or money?' After the identities are cleared up, the film ends with the newly-married couple traveling to Tubor's home.

Clara Bow

Like Colleen Moore, Clara Bow also played flapper roles, but with her mass of bobbed hair, plucked eyebrows, bow lips with dark lipstick, generous breasts, and wiggle walk, she was the sexy flapper. Unlike Moore, Bow's characters did not display hesitancy or self-consciousness in their flapper behavior. Her characters were sexually calculating in their pursuit of men, and her performance style conveyed sensual pleasure in her drinking, smoking, and wearing revealing clothes (Ross 2000). The film *It* took Bow's stardom to the top and confirmed her persona; as the 'It girl' she became 'the ranking Jazz baby of the Jazz age' and the 'foremost symbol of sex' of that period (Stenn 2000, p. 87). However, Bow's persona, the physically exuberant, sexually charged flapper, had been developed in her previous films, particularly *The plastic age* (1925), *Dancing mothers* (1926), and *Mantrap* (1926), and it had been reinforced by the reporting of Bow's numerous affairs off-screen (Stenn 2000, pp. 52–96, Felando 2004).

Bow had come from a poverty-stricken Brooklyn background, but in films such as *The plastic age*, *Dancing mothers*, and *My lady of whims* (1926) she played a wild young flapper from the upper-middle class. Bow's boundless energy and aggressive physicality were on prominent display in *It* in which she embodied the working-class flapper who is confident of, and ready to exploit, her sexual charms. The term 'It' had been coined by Elinor Glyn who wrote a novel with that title and also made a personal appearance in the film. In her novel the male character was the one with It, and although Glyn redefined the term to embrace women as well as men, her heroines retained elements of the Victorian lady; they responded in a submissive and passive way to the aggressive sexuality of the males. The attraction of the Clara Bow character in the film *It* was, in contrast, based on independence, strength, vivacity, and a determination to satisfy her desires. The character attains her goal by using the tactics of 'female' trickery: impersonation, deception, duplicity, and disruption (Landay 1998, pp. 78–81).

Although Bow's behavior is far removed from the moral standards of the Victorian lady, her working-class flapper is constrained by morality to a greater extent than her upper-middle-class flappers in her previous films. Mobility out of her class requires that she conforms to the rules of morality by which the wealthy man will judge her before he promises marriage. Her character, Betty Lou, sells lingerie in a department store, and she focuses her desires on Waltham, the new boss of the store. When Waltham comes to inspect the department in which Betty Lou works, he is the inadvertent object of her sexualized gaze ('Sweet Santa Claus, gimme *him*!'). The film then goes on to show Betty Lou's ultimately successful attempts to satisfy her acquisitive desire. For Betty Lou, a working girl, the acquisition of the boss will provide her with the means to actualize the fantasies of consumer culture.

Unlike the Pickford and Moore characters, the Bow heroine pursues Waltham with single-minded determination, but although she never considers that Waltham's wealth is a hindrance to their romance and marriage, it is evident that it is the man she desires rather than his money. Waltham, on his part, is attracted to Betty Lou precisely because of her class, which allows her, unlike his rich, well-mannered fiancée, to act in an unreserved and highly physical manner. In one scene Betty Lou persuades Waltham to join her in the amusements of Coney Island including a large inclined turntable called the 'social mixer'. As they are tossed together by the machine, the class barrier between them is broken and Betty Lou demonstrates that, in marked contrast to Waltham's undemonstrative fiancée, she is a flapper who is fun to be with. Betty Lou understands, however, the rules of sexual propriety and this is demonstrated when she responds to Waltham's kiss with a slap which, as we gather from her subsequent expression, is a performance intended to show him that he can only acquire her by marriage. The need to conform to the traditional limitations on premarital interaction is confirmed by the piteous state of Betty Lou's roommate, an unmarried mother.

The narrative of *It* links female sexual initiative to class transcendence, but it manages to do this without breaking the cross-class romance norm of disinterested love. The promise of marriage provides the conventional romantic ending, but Bow's performance in the film, which communicates more knowing sexuality than indicated by the narrative alone, suggests that marriage would not dampen Bow's sexually charged character (Felando 2004). Bow's persona made it appear unlikely that the reward of her character's disinterested love would transform the flapper into a conventional wife.

Conclusions

The personas of the female film stars of the 1920s represented different versions of the New Woman and all were located within a culture of consumerism. The fashion and beauty dimensions of consumer culture largely centered on the bodies of women, and it was the female stars, both on and off-screen, who provided exemplars of those dimensions. The public display of the female body, largely for the gaze of men, was already prevalent on the American stage in the 1890s when chorus girls became a major ingredient of musical shows (Banner 1983, pp. 180, 185), and by the early 1920s nudity was not uncommon, especially in revues (Latham 2000, pp. 105, 118). There were, of course, far greater restraints on the display of the female body in Hollywood films, and of the three stars discussed here only Clara Bow was frequently positioned as an object of the male gaze, although men were also shown to be the object of her gaze. When Bow as Betty Lou the salesgirl makes her boss the object of her gaze, her response is appropriate to the department store in which, like the movie theater, the (female) consumer is expected to look, desire, and to experience pleasure through fantasies of acquisition (Orgeron 2003).

A study in the 1920s of young film-goers found that boys in their mid-teens admitted to their pleasure in gazing at actresses on the screen, and we may assume that such pleasures were also common among adult males, but it was girls and women who were believed to be the ones fascinated with the spectacle of stars. Although adult men constituted about one-third of the American movie audience, the image of movie fandom in the 1920s was overwhelmingly feminine. Male fans had been common among film fans prior to World War I when they were represented as interested in the technical aspects of film-making. They were marginalized and discouraged by the promoters of the 1920s fan magazines who sought to attract more consumer product advertising by emphasizing their female readership. The many fan magazines of the 1920s increased their coverage of what were considered women's interests: romance and marriages of the stars, advice on etiquette, the stars' clothing, on and off-screen, and recipes from the stars' kitchens (Fuller 1996, pp. 116–119, 142–145, 188–189).

Although nearly all the stars played roles across the class spectrum, from upper or upper-middle society women to poor working-class girls, their personas carried class associations. Constance Talmadge was 'the epitome of the privileged flapper' (Haskell 1987, p. 80), and Gloria Swanson took ideals of consumerism to exotic heights (Higashi 1978, pp. 142–177). The personas of Mary Pickford, Colleen Moore, and Clara Bow tempered the image of 'the star as special' with that of 'the star as ordinary'. They all provided models of consumption and were paid to endorse a range of items, especially those associated with beauty and fashion (Fuller 1996, pp. 156–159, Addison 2000, pp. 18–22, Barbas 2001, pp. 38–39, 52–53, 78–81). At the same time they were promoted as working women who, in the cases of Mary Pickford and Clara Bow, had risen from poor backgrounds to fame and wealth. Pickford said that she liked to see her own sex achieve and was 'proud to be one of … the girls who earn their own living' (May 1980, p. 119).

The persona of Mary Pickford, which was established in the 1910s, diverged from the docile image of the Victorian ideal, but her muted, reticent sexuality distanced her from the flapper image. Although Pickford's working-girl role in *My best girl* provided an opportunity to follow in the mold of the flapper stars who also played working girls, her character was shown to be quite unlike a flapper. Unlike flapper characters who appear to be independent of any family of origin (we are told nothing of the families of the flapper characters in *Orchids and ermine* and *It*), Maggie, the Pickford character, is embedded in

a family that is dependent on her. Maggie's level-headedness is contrasted with her coquettish and irresponsible sister who dresses and acts like a flapper. Unlike most film flappers, who did not show any aspiration to motherhood, Maggie expresses her desire for a conventional, middle-class family life, and her remoteness from the flapper image is made evident in the scene near the end of the film when her exaggerated pretense at being a flapper fails to convince any of the characters.

Colleen Moore had risen to top stardom as a freedom-loving flapper, but her flapper characters remained sexually reticent and her basic innocence was emphasized even more so in her cross-class romance films. In *Irene* her character includes the child-like features of her earlier films, and although she undergoes glamorization, she remains modest and unassuming. Her character in *Orchids and ermine* is more mature and she acts and talks more like a flapper. However, although she might talk like a gold-digging flapper in the intertitles, it is her modest appearance that gets her a job as a hotel receptionist and her whimsical behavior that attracts the wealthy suitor. Moore's character is contrasted with the mercenary and sexually overt Ermintrude who is punished by ending up with the wealthy man's valet.

Clara Bow's persona was in some respects not unlike that of the negative female characters in the films of Pickford (Maggie's sister) and Moore (Pinki's friend Ermintrude). In contrast with Pickford's 'child-woman' and Moore's androgynous look, Bow was luscious-looking and far from reticent in her sexuality. However, in *It* Bow's character combined these characteristics with the knowledge that a sensible girl knew exactly how far she should allow a man to go. Unlike the female characters that provide negative comparisons with the heroines in *My best girl*, *Irene* and *Orchids and ermine*, the negative female in *It* is modest in appearance and behavior. She is, however, an unwedded mother and serves to provide the lesson that knowing how far to go in sexual behavior is a pre-condition for the carefree lifestyle of the true flapper as epitomized by Clara Bow.

Although they differed considerably in their personas and in the characters they played in the cross-class romances, the characters of all three stars conformed to the norm of disinterested love. None of them pursued the men they desired because of their wealth. In *My best girl* and *Orchids and ermine* there could be no question of mercenary motives because the characters are unaware that the men with whom they fall in love are wealthy. All the initiative in the cross-class romance in *Irene* comes from the wealthy suitor whose insistence effects the transformation of Irene from an awkward waif into a glamorous model. In *It* Waltham's wealth is evident to Betty Lou, Bow's character, but her desire for the man rather than his money is conveyed by Bow's performance style from her very first look at him. The absence of a mercenary motive is shown when Bow's character risks ending the relationship when she seeks to take her revenge on Waltham after he has shown his lack of faith in her by believing that she has a child. By her actions, Bow's Betty Lou demonstrates her virtues including, one has to presume, her virginity, and, like the characters played by Pickford and Moore, it is for her virtues, including her disinterested love, that Betty Lou is rewarded with a wealthy man.

All three stars mediated variations of the New Woman with a morality that remained linked to Victorianism, and when they played working-class roles this mediation enabled them to win the wealthy man. Their disinterested love was a precondition of their successful romance, but the location of the romance within the sites of consumerism conveyed the implicit message that it was the class difference among men that was decisive for the position of women. The disinterested love of the women was a form of exchange for the class and status that the men could give them, and in the consumer society it was the wealthy man who provided the means for the ideal romance. The films

confirmed that the freedoms of the New Woman were confined within a class system linked to gender.

Notes on contributor

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Selective filmography

Irene, 1926. Directed by Alfred E. Green. USA: First National Pictures.
It, 1927. Directed by Clarence G. Badger. USA: Famous Players-Lasky.
My best girl, 1927. Directed by Sam Taylor. USA: Mary Pickford Company.
Orchids and ermine, 1927. Directed by Alfred Santell. USA: John McCormick Productions.

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