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'England's Apollo': Ivor Novello, Divinised Stardom, and Researching Star Discourse in the Film Fan-magazine

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Introduction

Back in the late 1990s, when researching Britain's leading matinee-idol of the 1920s, Ivor Novello, it was an expression in a piece of seemingly throw-away publicity in a fan-magazine that helped me crystalize his appeal for contemporary audiences. I had already been struck by Novello's astonishingly luminous close-ups in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Lodger* (1926), and knew of his enduring association with the war anthem 'Keep the Home Fires Burning', which he co-wrote in 1914, but this advertisement for a 1923 fantasy film directed by Adrian Brunel, seemed to resonate with these aspects, and suggest so much more. The main text of the advertisement simply read: "Readers of Picture Show! Do you admire IVOR NOVELLO (ENGLAND'S APOLLO) Ask the manager of your local cinema when he is showing him in "The Man Without Desire!"¹ The bracketed reference was a little tongue-in-cheek (fitting the tone of some of Brunel's productions) in suggesting that if its readers didn't recognise the star's name, they might be more familiar with this mythically grandiose alter-ego, as if removing the mask of a superhero. Nonetheless, the taken-for-granted nature of this divinised and yet casual rhetoric (akin to a sincere assertion followed by a knowing wink) intrigued me, and led me to pursue its implications for Novello's screen persona in the context of interwar Britain and then, in more recent research, the uses of this 'classical' discourse in the construction of stardom more widely.

The serendipitous 'discovery' of intriguing, illuminating, and often entertaining references such as this are familiar to anyone who has spent time reading and researching fan-magazines. When researching film stardom, fan magazines are an essential, and reliably rich, source for helping one to understand the nature of the phenomenon and its evolving discourse, and particularly its relationship to the wider cultural context and prior cultural forms. Magazines record a space where fans could, to some degree, negotiate their own position within the star system, and engage with others in national and international forums. In doing so fans were active contributors to, and often challengers of, star discourse, even as the implied hierarchy of the star/idol 'above', and fan/worshipper 'below', implicit by divinised star discourse, remained. While back in the 1990s and early 2000s, most of my trawls for Novello fan-magazine material

came through flicking through firstly indexed Novello reviews and features, and then whole runs of British and American magazines in archives such as the BFI Library and British Newspaper Library, the coming of online digitized resources such as the Media History Digital Library, has been transformative. It has facilitated access largely regardless of geography, and converted the magazines themselves into wonderfully searchable artefacts. In terms of stardom as a discourse, this aids in the pursuit of the shifting vocabulary of nouns and adjectives of which it is comprised, while the ability to perform keyword searches in downloadable PDF documents, or the MHDL's 'Lantern' search and data-mining 'Arclight' application, unearths material that would otherwise be overlooked.

Using Ivor Novello as a starting point, pulling at the threads of the 'England's Apollo' reference above, this chapter will draw from a series of specific examples taken from research using hundreds of American and British fan magazines to survey the shifting star discourse from the 1910s to the early 30s. I highlight the richness of stardom's printed language, chasing words – focusing on the 'divinising' publicity rhetoric of 'gods', idols, Venuses and Apollos – as revealed by both 'traditional' browsing of fan magazines in the archive, and through digital engagement with these sources. I ask 'Why Apollo?', and why this reference to the Greek god was so resonant for Novello and many of his peers, before moving on to explore what we might learn about the nature of film stardom as we go searching for Apollo in the fan-magazines. Can digitized magazines offer a different way to pursue these sometimes explicit, some times more coded, references to classical myth?

Ivor Novello: 'England's Apollo'

I find the phrase 'England's Apollo' interesting for several reasons. Firstly, as indicated above, it alerted me to the existence of a pervasive 'divinised' discourse to film stardom, with its casual association between 'Apollo' and Novello asserted as easily as the more general language that persists today in new incarnations, of stars as 'idols', 'gods', and 'goddesses'. As we shall see, Apollo is by far the most frequently invoked classical deity with respect to male stars, while Venus is the goddess of choice for their female counterparts. Apollo was the Greek god of light, art and music, and is known as a usually youthful, handsome and streamlined type in Hellenistic sculpture, and its many revivals. So it is entirely fitting, and flattering, for the ideals and fashions of early twentieth century idols, and particularly the age of Art Deco of the 20s and 30s. Likewise, Venus, as the goddess of beauty and love, is also readily appropriated for modern purposes, with both ancient models providing a gift to fan-magazines in offering the potential for regular comparisons between 'old' and 'new' idols, cloaked in the 'respectable' nudity often associated with 'high' sculptural art felicitously permitting the display of semi-nude stars, too, as in *Photoplay's* 'Olympus Moves to Hollywood' feature from April 1928.ⁱⁱ While the reference to an 'Apollo', and even more a 'Greek God' can be generic on the level of someone who is handsome or

desirable, with these labels implying that the fans *should* find them desirable and worthy of ‘worship’ in the manner of a god, the reference can be much more specific too, and this is what interested me in Novello. What else might lie behind *England’s Apollo*? Firstly, we need to recall who Novello was.

Cardiff-born Ivor Novello starred in 22 features between 1919 and 1934, making films in France, Germany (German-UK co-productions), and two in the United States, but the rest were produced in Britain where, alongside Betty Balfour, he was arguably the country’s leading male screen star and one of its brightest lights internationally. Indeed, in 1923, an advertisement in *Exhibitor’s Herald* announced that ‘..Novello is hailed as another great male star coming to help the nation’s box-offices at a time when they welcome help’, words suggesting that Novello is some kind of saviour from above, descending to raise British film’s fortunes in competition with Hollywood, and would be words repeated in years to come.ⁱⁱⁱ The advertisement in question was placed by American Releasing Corporation in its campaign for the US release of *The Bohemian Girl* (Harley Knowles, 1922), placing Novello’s image (in half-profile, of course) next to a glowing review from *Harrison’s Reports* attesting to the film’s appeal to both ‘the cultured class...to the foreigners as well as to the native-born Americans’. This film, based on Balfe’s opera, appears to have been Novello’s highest-profile and most successful American release, which is surprising as today a film such as Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Lodger* (1926) overshadows the rest of Novello’s work (unfairly), let alone this now-obscure film from the earlier part of his career, before he stamped his identity on film through Gainsborough’s *The Rat* (Graham Cutts, 1925), playing the eponymous role he co-authored for himself on the stage. The extent to which *The Bohemian Girl* dominated Novello’s US reception, aided by particularly strong promotion, is graphically revealed by a simple keyword search for ‘Ivor Novello’ on the Media History Digital Archive’s ‘Arclight’ search engine (fig.1). When I researched Novello for my PhD thesis, and then book, I had concentrated on his British films and reception in Britain, barring a few forays into overseas reviews. This was a choice qualified by my focus on a particular group of films in the mid-1920s, and by my wish to fully explore the specificities of Novello’s cultural presence in the UK. At that time, widening my search to his American reception would have required a considerable investment in time, particularly as references would likely to have been relatively few and far between. Now, it takes mere moments for a search to bring back potentially thousands of returns, and to gain a general impression, for the moment this broad, unfiltered or normalised, picture is sufficient. As can be seen in the figure below, from 1914-1936, which ranges from references to Novello as a composer until his ‘retirement’ from the screen, there is one very significant peak in 1923, and then a lesser one in the early and mid-30s. The first peak coincides with the marketing of *The Bohemian Girl* and, crucially, Novello’s arrival in the USA having signed a five picture deal with director D.W. Griffith, thus enabling publicists to promote what was seen to be a prestigious British production with Novello taking the romantic lead, while also launching him as a

prospective ‘Hollywood’ star with a future. Unfortunately, Novello made no further films for the director after *The White Rose* (1924), and Novello sued Griffith for breach of contract (Griffith having his own difficulties at that time, revolving around a dispute at United Artists, of which he was one of the founders). The second peak also maps onto Novello’s second spell in Hollywood as

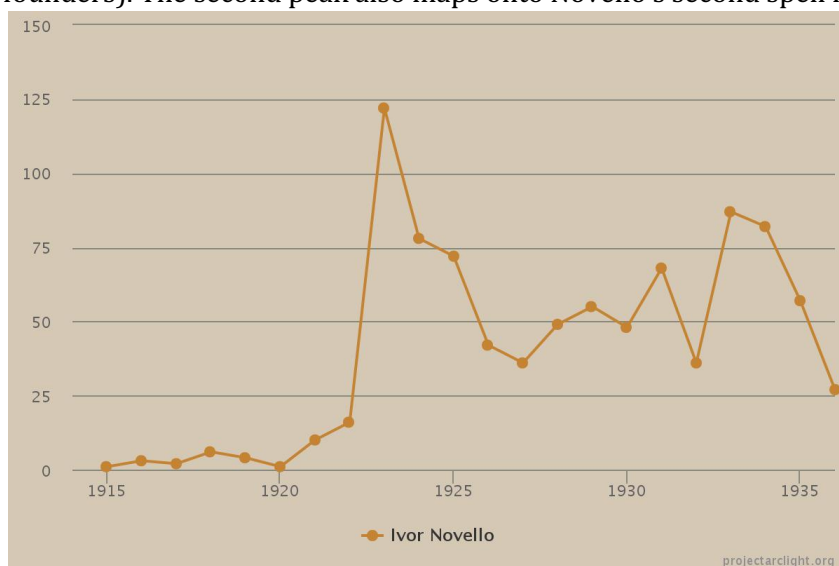


Figure 1

a writer, although what actually generates most of the hits revealed in the diagram are reviews and listings for his British sound features, being shown, sometimes with positive response, after he had already returned to the UK. Both times, America’s loss would be Britain’s gain, with Novello returning to great stage success, as in the case of *The Rat* (and then in the three films it spawned), and then the string of West End hits he would continue to enjoy until his early death in 1951 at the age of 58. Crude as it is, and based on a limited number of search returns, this simple chart does point the researcher towards asking why 1923 should stand out so clearly, and thus pursue the ‘slow search’, and ‘slow scholarship’ in the archives, digital and analogue, to follow the ‘quick’ one.^{iv}

Inevitably, comparison, usually to another star but sometimes a classical divinity, is perhaps the easiest initial means to promote a star, and fan-magazines are full of new stars bringing with them inevitable taglines of ‘the next Valentino’ or ‘the new Garbo’. When *Motion Picture Magazine* discussed *The Bohemian Girl*, it reported that ‘from all reports Mr. Novello is one of the handsomest young leading men now on the screen’.^v Above these words on the same page is the famous image of Rudolph Valentino proudly raising a tangle of spaghetti from a pan. The tacit invitation to compare is coincidental, perhaps, but nonetheless there. Two months later the same publication reviewed the film itself, and although feeling it to be ‘slow and obvious’ remarked that it was likely to ‘win some attention because of Ivor Novello’s presence in the role of the gypsy youth. This is the day of the Latin Lover and Ivor has been getting his exploitation’.^{vi} This slightly backhanded compliment places Novello in the same ‘Latin Lover’ fold as the Italian star and others such as the Mexican Ramón Novarro and Ricardo Cortez, who was a Jew from New York, indicating how ethnically elastic this Hollywood type could be. American Releasing

also handled the distribution of *The Rat* in the USA in 1926, and went straight for the Valentino angle there too. In its two week campaign in *The Film Daily* in September that year, Novello is heralded with a different tagline across six variations of the advertisement, including ‘The Sheik of the Screen’ and ‘The Screen’s Greatest Lover’.^{vii} While *The Rat* does contain ‘The Rat Step’, a parody of Valentino’s tango from *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Rex Ingram, 1921) done in Apache style, this might have come across as a little opportunistic given that the Italian idol died only weeks before on 23 August. Given the deliberate link to the Latin Lover, there was some ensuing befuddlement around Novello’s national and ethnic identity. Confusion between being ‘British’ and ‘English’, or ‘Welsh’ in Novello’s case, in the American press is not entirely unusual, but it was certainly the case throughout Novello’s reception. Introducing ‘Griffith’s Choice’ of leading man, *Picture-Play* claims that Novello is not ‘an imitation of an established film idol’, but refers to him as ‘a young Englishman’.^{viii} Moreover, in the next paragraph columnist Helen Klumph refers to the ‘..handsomest young man I had ever seen’ as speaking with ‘a melodic voice with an Italian accent’. Given Novello’s dark Celtic features and the Latin Lover marketing, the mistake might be easily made if one were unfamiliar with Novello’s soft Welsh lilt. The article compounds the Mediterranean impression that Novello comes from Cardiff-by-Naples by making a double error in its description that ‘a very Italian shrug disturbed the very English tweed shoulders’. Let’s not ask if it was Scottish tweed. Novello himself, however, is quoted as saying that he has an Italian father, which is perhaps a story like other stars wishing to add an ‘exotic’ touch to their names, though untrue, to explain his surname (Novello was still David Ivor Davies at this point, only officially adopting ‘Novello’, via his mother’s middle name, in 1927).

It may be that a more mythologised, less specific, vernacular was advantageous in this evidently vexed business of signalling the national and ethnic identity of stars in a manner that is clear and attractive to fans, while negotiating the unsavoury xenophobia of some of the contemporary audience. A ‘Greek god’ or ‘Apollo’ is thus suitably abstract and flexible as a marketing label, extrapolating appearance to an ancient but constantly modified aesthetic built to construct desire. This is a readymade and familiar type to make sense of, which can be placed vaguely above or in parallel to cinema’s own types and genres. Perhaps it was better to say, as the *New York Telegraph* did in a quote appropriated to promote *The Bohemian Girl*, that Novello ‘looks like a Greek god and is an intelligent, handsome actor’.^{ix}

The first page of *Picture-Play*’s feature is comprised of two photographs of Novello (fig.2), one in costume in

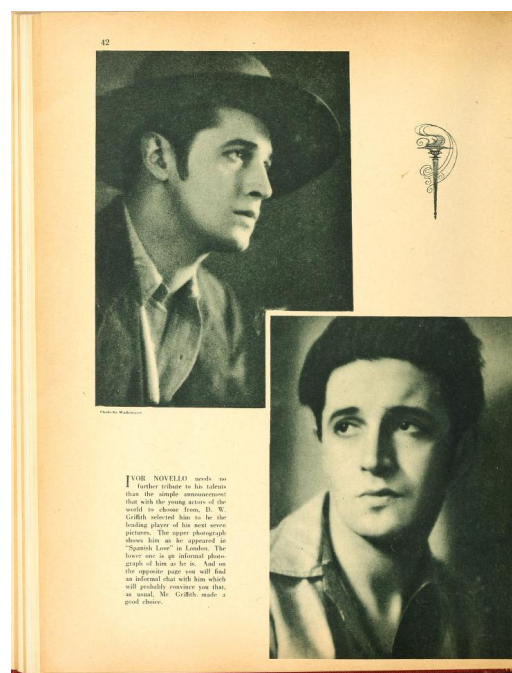


Figure 2

the play 'Spanish Love', the other purportedly an 'informal photograph of him as he is'. In between is an illustration of a flaming torch in classical style, Novello apparently gazing towards it. The portrait of Novello 'as he is' could hardly be more romantically idealised with the wistful turn of the head – recalling Hellenistic busts of Alexander the Great – soft focus, and light that sculpts his 'classic profile' and throws a halo of light onto the background. With open-necked shirt, it is very much in keeping with earlier images of Novello from the 1910s in the wake of his composition of 'Home Fires' that are very much in the Rupert Brooke mould of romantic, idealised youth. The article remarks on Novello's age, observing a 'curious combination of little boy and man of the world. It is difficult to reconcile this brown-eyed youth to the personage Ivor Novello.' While this could mean many things, this language echoes publicity for Ramón Novarro in the mid-1920s. *Motion Picture Classic* claimed of Novarro, who was often presented as if the reincarnated spirit of classical youth: 'this boy is the window through which the light and the learning of a people long since vanished from the earth shines again.'^x We'll see a similar example for Novello shortly. Indeed, Novello's actual age was subject to remarkable variances in accuracy at this time, although he was hardly alone in this. *Motion Picture Classic's* 'The Answer Man' replied to one enquiry in 1923 that Novello's age was 'twenty-four', when he was actually thirty by this point. As Heather Addison has discussed,^{xi} youth was one of the most valued commodities in Hollywood in the interwar period, and with references to Greek gods, one blends that element of youth with the fine cultural vintage of the ancient past to Pygmalionesque effect.

That association with Rupert Brooke alludes to another key part of Novello's image, his connection with the Great War. This became the main focus of my earlier research on the star as his cultural connection with 'Home Fires' was maintained throughout his career and was subject to comment in features, reviews and fan letters in Britain as well as in the USA. As I have discussed elsewhere, this association can be seen to underscore the character and reception of many of his film roles, where romantic, but often suffering, males predominate.^{xii} Fan-magazines were crucial to evidencing this argument in the way that they engage with contemporary discourses, and express, or allude to, matters that would otherwise be ephemeral or not publicly expressed at all. Edith Nepean's comments on 'the war touch' in Britain's *Picture Show*, in which she observed an implicit undercurrent relating to the war in films not overtly connected to it, demonstrated that readings of implicit traces of contemporary concerns was not just a matter of projecting these things with the benefit of hindsight and a too-active imagination, but something that has always taken place by critics and fans, whatever the intention of filmmakers.^{xiii} This neatly maps onto Richard Dyer's notion of star 'charisma',^{xiv} where successful stars resonate with the things that matter to their cultural and historical context, and thus a star like Novello might be seen to embody some of these concerns for their audience. One of these 'war touched' aspects for Novello is the quality of his youth and how its peculiarly wistful nature chimes with the 'myth' of the lost generation of the Great War, to connote either the vulnerability of the young male, or that

he is a figure 'brought back' by an act of yearning imagination. Here Novello connects with a wider phenomenon of Pygmalionism in early star discourse, and indeed the mythic trick of cinema itself, in conjuring the illusion of life and movement from still images – as the sculptor Pygmalion brought the statue of Galatea to life in the Greek myth – something which Lynda Nead has explored in turn of the century art.^{xv} Many magazine features in the 1910s play on this theme, with *Photoplay* one of the most forthright in its historical imaginings that place (Hollywood) cinema in a direct line back to the greatest achievements of the antiquities of Babylon, Egypt, Greece and Rome. 'Is not America destined to perfect and perpetuate the peerless new art of The Shadow that Lives?' it asked its readers in 1916.^{xvi} Within this framework, the star becomes the living art object, activated by producing structures of cinema, who take the place of divine intervention in the myth. But at the same time, the star is also to be a talented artist of the screen, so there is a certain tension in agency here. Suggesting that the star is like Apollo or Venus is a way around this; what this assertion really means is that the star is like a *statue* of the god, and thus can be both a work of art, or merely an ideal, from the past but for the present, but also can be seen to be something playfully akin to a 'god' themselves ('in disguise' as we'll see shortly).

In terms of these sculptural plays on the figure of the star, as well as references to a star being 'chiseled' or as beautiful as a statue (and thus placing them in the context of receptions of the classical ideal), one finds at least three tropes that play on the theme. Firstly, there is the overt reference to the Pygmalion myth in the living statue. The best example of this with respect to Novello is still the first I found, Sydney Carroll's wonderfully extravagant, and not a little homoerotic, fantasy upon the star's features in the *Daily Telegraph*, which concludes: 'Surely some Greek statue of a young, athletic poet has been brought to life?'^{xvii} The poet reference recalls eulogies to the war, and is also used to negotiate the reaction of many critics to Novello that he is *absurdly* handsome, and thus that something needs to be said about it. One may as well displace this difficulty into myth, and this critic at least keeps things complimentary. There had been a fad for living statue acts on the stage in the early 1900s, and a Lantern search brings up many of these from the theatrical press. The key thing to elicit applause would be to mimic a recognisable statue by its pose, and this is one reason for the currency of Apollos and Venuses in star discourse, given their cultural familiarity. Even dogs got into the act, giving rise to Vitagraph's short *The Statue Dog* in 1910, featuring a white bulldog who 'looks like marble when he stands like a statue of Apollo Belvedere' and in other poses.^{xviii} A second trope that emerges is that of 'switching pedestals', which involves either a star exchanging places for a statue, or being imagined to be the model that inspired the sculpture in the first place. We can see this in the following 1923 example from *Photoplay* in which Herbert Howe ruminates on Novello's performance in *The White Rose*, and that 'acting with that profile is no mean feat': 'He looks like the guy that posed for the Apollo Belvedere. And he has a profile that pays and pays and pays—photographically. There isn't a stretch of scenery south of the Mason-Dixon line that it wasn't plastered against.'^{xix} This was

evidently a favoured theme of Howe's, which he also applied to Ramón Novarro a year later (with whom Howe has been romantically connected), in a description I'm fond of quoting: 'Novarro's chief handicap have been his youth and good looks. If he ever visits the Vatican the Apollo Belvedere is going to get down and apologize for having taken up so much time. Both for classic countenance and physique Ramon could easily pass as an authentic Phidian athletic'.^{xx} We have another form of this trope in the 'iconotext' image, where a star is juxtaposed with a classical statue, either in person, as in a 1923 portrait of Gloria Swanson standing next to a statuette of the Venus de Milo on set,^{xxi} or as a visual comparison undertaken by the magazine itself, as in the 'Olympus Moves to Hollywood' feature (although here the statuette of Venus was cropped out of an image of Joan Crawford). Here there is a reflection (and sometimes explicit mirroring of pose) between sculpture and star that opens up many questions about the status of each, with the divinised formulation somewhat intermediate as while the star is implied to be the new incarnation of the sculpture/god, the latter still endures as a silent observer. A fourth form has the star embody the form, or associations, of the god. This can either be through a pose that recalls Apollo or Venus, for example (as in the manner of Joshua Reynolds' 18th century portraits), or alternatively in written text, comments about a star being a god 'in disguise', which prompts the reader to visualise what this might look like. I'll return to these matters below. 'England's Apollo' is a variation of this, grammatically inserting the mythical god into contemporary space and time, and in Novello's case here, the national resonance, with the star's war associations (and Apollo himself often represented as an archer, not least in the Belvedere version), perhaps adding a heroic resonance. Other examples of this mythic taxonomy include Garbo as 'the Stockholm Venus' or, in my favourite example, Ramón Novarro as the 'Greek God from Mexico'.^{xxii}

In Novello's marketing and reception, his famed 'classic profile', exploited across innumerable photographs and loving descriptions, was his leading and most readily marketable asset. This was a profile that spoke across international boundaries. However, this profile was also an endowment that was deployed, particularly in reviews looking for something to be critical of, to undermine Novello's authority as a star, and by implication his adoring fans too. As Howe's comment about the challenge of acting with this profile infers, there is a sub-text that because Novello is 'beautiful' (and that his beauty is more feminine than masculine), he cannot be more than this, and must be deficient in other areas, including acting ability. Novello is thus browbeaten by his own classical profile. A Lantern search for 'Greek god' brings up numerous articles on beauty, all maintain this term as an ideal, but sometimes warning, perhaps to reassure mere mortals, of the danger of looking *too much* like a Greek god, rendering one somehow alienating inhuman, or too close to the gods on the human-statue scale. As one fan wrote to *Picture-Play* in 1928, 'I, for one, would rather have a star of individuality and character than one with all the physical attributes of a Greek god'.^{xxiii} While *The Bohemian Girl* brought Novello to notice in the USA, it was *The White Rose* that acted as a turning point in his promotion and

reception in different ways, and magnified his stardom once he returned home in a reflected Hollywood glow (the 'England's Apollo' reference being made upon Novello's return to Britain, with the release of the film he shot before he left). Britain's *Picturegoer* asserted in 1924 that Novello was 'never in the Valentino-Novarro category until Griffith came along', the director who, in fairytale fashion, was reported to have: 'caught sight one evening of the clean-cut profile, the forehead and classic features of his dreams'. Griffith himself is here reported to have remarked that "when he gets rid of the tendency to overact, he'll be the best of all screen juveniles, for he photographs like a Greek god".^{xxiv} The film's US reception suggests that critics felt that Griffith overcompensated. *The Film Daily* remarked that Novello's 'ability to act is considerably overshadowed by his handsomeness, which Griffith hasn't failed to exploit in numerous close-ups', *The Exhibitor's Herald* noted 'too many' close-ups of the star's 'pulchritude', and *The Educational Screen* felt him to be 'excessively beautiful to look at, and correspondingly useless except as a peg to hang the plot on'.^{xxv} Other stars did receive similar comments, notably Novarro on the release of *Where the Pavement Ends* (Rex Ingram, 1923), when *The Moving Picture World* noted that he was 'like a Greek god at times', but the 'tendency to give him long poses' was counteracted by his work in 'really dramatic situations'.^{xxvi} Thus it seems OK to be like a Greek god, so long as shots do not linger to the point of being unduly statuesque. 'Excessive' beauty may be a nice problem to have, and Novello admirers were not inclined to complain. *Screenland's* Delight Evans was inclined to agree, observing the following, with a nod to the star's musical persona: 'Ivor Novello— ah, Ivor. With a profile that, if it returned the camera continually, would make the home fires of our little fans go out.'^{xxvii}

As is clear above, Novello's physical attractiveness, and more specifically the kind of handsomeness he possessed, being suggestive of a statue or a posed figure, and 'tarnished' by its clear appeal to women, also carries connotations of effeminacy, constructed as a marker of homosexuality. In mainstream newspapers and fan-magazines, one would not expect to find direct comments on this matter, for reasons of taste and law, but there are traces in fan-magazines that reveal this undercurrent to Novello's reception, and hints of the social history that lies behind it. I do not have scope here to explore this matter fully, but one of the least disguised references was one of the first American reviews I found of the *New York Times* that describes the star's first appearance in *The Lodger* as 'looking pale and drawn and with a manner plainly saying that he very likely doesn't care for blondes at all.'^{xxviii} Another, typically snide, review of Novello's 1924 stage appearance in *The Rat*, seems to sigh at the 'solid phalanx of femininity' that follows him 'no matter how maidenlike his manner', before concluding that his actual performance was 'surprisingly good'.^{xxix} *Variety* had also despaired earlier that year at the modern phenomenon of 'Hero-worship' and 'idolatry', throwing its hands up that the 'most idealized man in London today is Ivor Novello, whose exploits consist of looking well in a uniform, composing indifferent music and acting incompetently'. Instead, it believes, audiences should be flocking to Captain

Buchanan's documentary *Crossing the Great Sahara*. By implication, Buchanan is a real hero – 'of the right kind', as it puts it – and not a posing screen idol who looks good, appeals to women, and not a few men, too.

From looking at some of the ways in which Novello's reception points to a wider phenomenon of divinised stardom, the final section of this chapter will now focus on the patterns that emerge when searching for this aspect in fan-magazines, and particularly when using the Lantern search engine and Arclight application.

Searching for Apollo

After spending years using 'slow' research to find examples of divinised star discourse, recently, I have begun to use keyword searches within downloaded PDF documents as a more systematic way of determining shifts among specific references. Before I explored what Arclight might bring to such searches, out of interest I produced a graph to visualise the data that I had gathered from

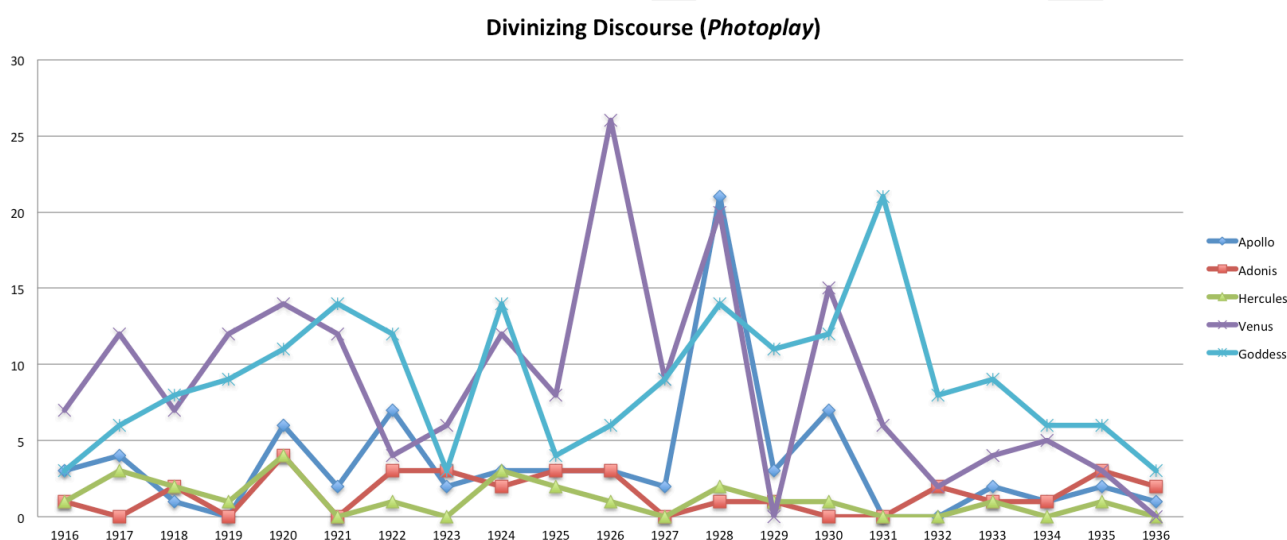


Figure 3

a 'slow' search of *Photoplay* magazine (fig.3). The data used was comprised of the number of results for each search term, but filtering out those that were unrelated to stars (names of cinemas, etc.). While these may not be great in number, they do, I would argue, constitute a significant and influential thread within the construction of star discourse, including the visual representation of stars which exists beyond the realm of keywords (although search by image is possible online). To highlight just a few points, in this crude survey, Hercules can be seen to put on a heroic struggle, but once we are past 1920, he is no match for Adonis, and certainly not Apollo, in popularity. A keyword search for 'Hercules' and 'Tarzan', though, would no doubt bring up connections around the release of a film, mapping onto shifts in fashions for body type, too. This perhaps says something about the type of streamlined physicality required of the male star in the 1920s and 30s. Adonis is also far less frequently invoked than Apollo, which we will also see confirmed by the Arclight results. Venus frequently occurs from the outset, unsurprising given the fan-magazines attention of female stars, and address to female readers in features and

particularly health and cosmetics advertising, where many results come from. The convergence of several peaks in 1928 can be partially explained by the aforementioned ‘Olympus Moves to Hollywood’ article, but without this, Apollo would still see a rise from the previous year, although Venus would dip down to just 5 direct references. Venus’ year was clearly 1926, perhaps due to the release of Frank Tuttle’s *The American Venus*, which renewed the term and was a gift to the magazines in inevitable comparisons between the goddess and other stars.

While one could add many terms to these searches, I was interested in how a mythical, yet general, term such as ‘goddess’ would appear here, and it is a word that seems to become dominant by the 1930s (and thinking of later decades, one would expect to see a coincidence with the ‘love goddess’ types of Ava Gardner and Rita Hayworth in the late 1940s, and this appears to be the case). Among other mythic but increasingly ‘secular’ terms is the ‘siren’, although the ancient gods are themselves now secularised, recalling the Greek myth, of which there are 37 instances in 1933 (and 23 in *Picture-Play*). Interestingly, this term was particularly pertinent to Greta Garbo’s press in the early sound period in suggesting (and enhancing) her ‘mysterious’

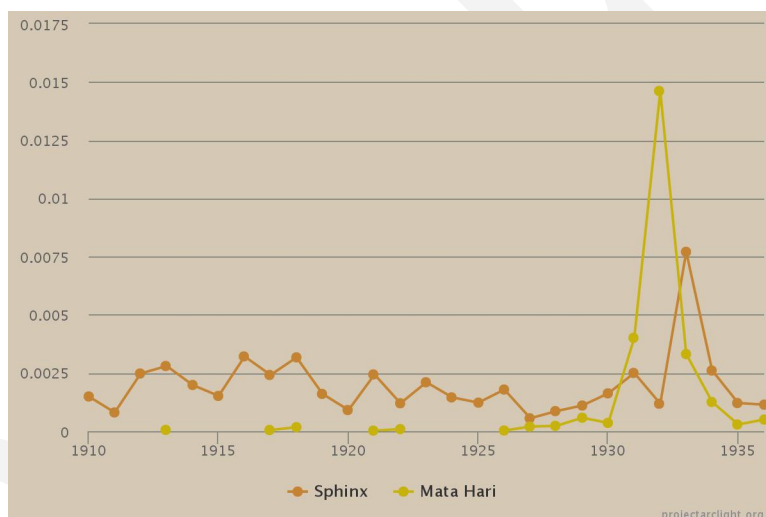


Figure 4

quality, which extends to the tone, and frequent silence, of her voice. As *Screenland* put it in a headline 1929, ‘The Swedish Sphinx Speaks’, blending the Egyptian myth with a broader figure of the siren.^{xxx} This implies a reduction in *overtly* divinized discourse, then a substitution with less specific terms, at least within the period examined here.

Some of these results were missed by an Arclight search using these and other keywords (perhaps due to the evolving capabilities of optical character recognition software), while the Arclight / Lantern search brought many other to light that I had previously overlooked. Remaining with Garbo for a moment, searching for ‘Sphinx’ and ‘Mata Hari’ (fig.4) clearly indicates where references to Garbo’s 1931 *Mata Hari* (George Fitzmaurice) peaked in 1932, with its imagery resonating with both the siren Hari and Garbo’s Sphinx-like persona. Looking more closely at these results, the 1933 peak of ‘Sphinx’ that followed is comprised by a number of factors. Of the 214 hits, 6 refer directly to Garbo as a Sphinx, more than the other three stars

associated with it (those stars being Claudette Colbert, Myrna Loy and, strangely, Ronald Colman, with one hit each). The vast majority of results for ‘Sphinx’ were reviews and listings for Phil Rosen’s 1933 Monogram feature by that name. This certainly evidences an increased discourse around the Sphinx, but for many reasons. Perhaps more pertinent is the rise in ‘goddess’ in the wake of *Mata Hari*, a term highlighted in taglines used to promote the film. More significant is the smaller peak in 1931. Again, this corresponds with the release of Garbo’s film that year, but while ‘Sphinx’ was attributed to four other stars with one reference each (Gloria Swanson, Lilyan Tashman as well as John Gilbert and Richard Cromwell – a quality of silence or inscrutability linking each), Garbo received a convincing twelve times as many, including the famous photomontage of the star merged with the Great Sphinx of Giza by Clarence Sinclair Bull.^{xxxi} The search tools, combined with more detailed scrutiny, which is facilitated by the quick connections to Lantern results, proves highly illuminating here.

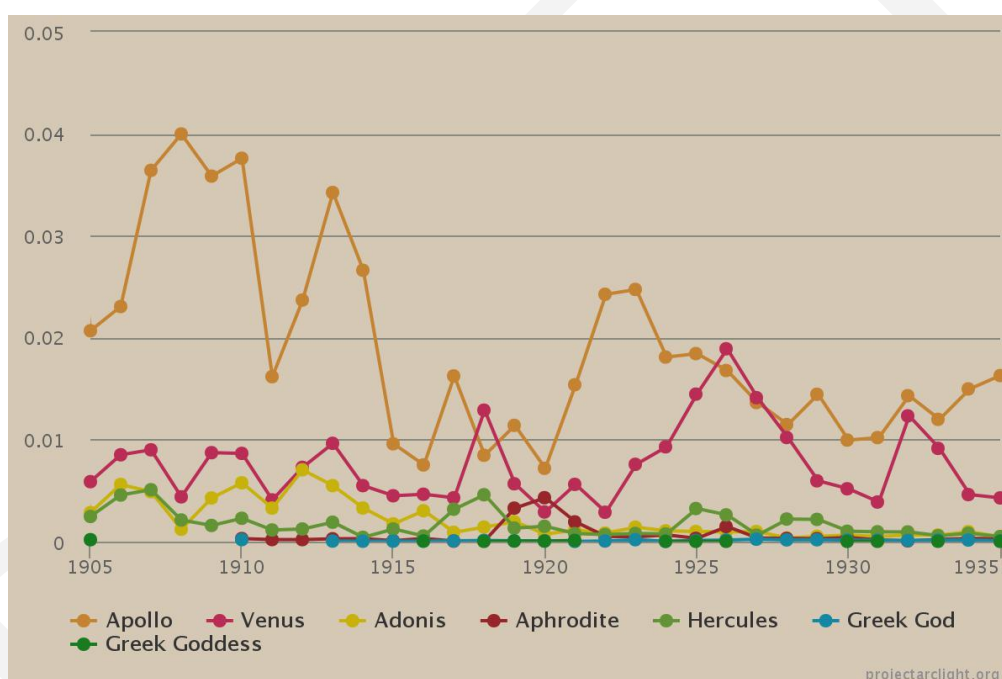


Figure 5

Figure 5 illustrates results for a much wider Arclight search for a number of key mythic figures that I have been discussing. These show results from the twenty year period 1905 to 1935, and draw from all the digitized resources in the MHDA without filter to show broad trends rather than those from specific magazines. The graph shows ‘normalised’ results, to indicate their proportion amid available pages, rather than being distorted by, for example, numerous results on one page of a publication. The results are crude here, and detailed research could unpick them, but they do point to some trends. What is immediately clear is that Apollo is by far the most widely used of the common classical references, even when dismissing many of the results (particularly in the first ten years) that actually refer to theatres, cinemas, films and production companies. On that note, I would also argue that those results that do not directly refer to an

individual or type nonetheless point to the currency of the reference in the performing arts, and particularly cinema for the reasons outlined above, giving those that do refer to a particular star even more representative resonance. The results have greater relevance once we get into the 1920s, and the peak in 1923 (also clear in the non-normalised results) indicates 1047 instances. 'Venus' has a pronounced peak in 1926 (613 results), partly though references to the film *The American Venus* and the currency of the term in beauty advertisements, a visibility which makes the currency of the term perhaps more prominent than Apollo. The Roman 'Venus' is more familiar than her Greek counterpart, 'Aphrodite', although the latter is sometimes used. Likewise, 'Adonis', peaking in 1912 with 142 references, refers to particular individuals or characters in the majority of cases. However, while the term vividly conjured up the image of a physically desirable man, there is perhaps a connotation of narcissism to the term in lacking the streamlined active physicality associated with Apollo, as well as it being a less specific sculptural type (it is difficult to name a famed example), that perhaps makes it less fashionable or 'modern'. This confirms the impression I had with my prior research. The term 'Greek God' and 'Greek Goddess' barely register on the main graph, but each reference is likely to describe an individual or type. Focusing solely on those terms one can see a clear peak in 1923 with 8 results (when we find the references to Novello, and Novarro as the 'Greek God from Mexico') and again in 1927-30, ranging from 6 to 7 results. Focusing on the post-1915 period, Apollo peaks in 1923, with further peaks in 1929 and 1932. Less specific than an 'Apollo', references to a 'Greek god' usually describe a male figure of desire, and often as a figure that appears rather abstractly before one, either as part of a subjective fantasy about cinema, or in several instances as a screen idol met at a party. A common thread is that this figure emerges from a dream-like state, with his attributes being very physical (statuesque, athletic or muscular), and thus there is a more sexual element than suggested by Apollo, who is perhaps more distant, and almost incorporeal or inhuman (taking us back to cold marble once more).

While the Arclight results are intriguing, and can prompt future research, we learn more from examining specific examples from within the results which can illuminate how the terms were used and may have been understood. Film star discourse, including its divinised aspects, drew from prior cultural forms, primarily the popular theatre and opera. For example, we encounter an Apollo in a 1906 issue of the *New York Clipper* newspaper. Here we find 'Lauriette', a *Clipper* reader, submitting a verse on how actors behind the footlights are rendered more attractive if they are known to be unmarried, and thus theoretically 'free to accept the homage and attention of admirers'. Thus the 'maiden in the front row' is imagined to exclaim "'Oh, how heaven'ly it would be / To have one love you such as he. / Those beautiful, glorious, big, brown eyes! / He must be Apollo in disguise.'" On learning from an aunt that this actor is married, the spell is broken and suddenly "'he's ugly as can be'". This verse treats the unnamed subject humorously, but it is clear that successful stage players, like their moving picture counterparts,

are romantically attractive figures glowing in light, with the classical ideal, Apollo, contrasted with the all-too-human “ugly” or “horrid thing”.^{xxxii} The term ‘star’ for headline theatrical performers was commonplace in the theatre since the late 18th century, long before the arrival of their cinematic counterparts. By at least 1910, however, we see the film star being confidently referred to as such when the first search results from Arclight emerge for the ‘film star’ and ‘picture star’ in *Variety*. In that year we have the familiar example of Florence Lawrence referred to as a ‘film star’ in *Variety* in April that year in a report about the famously premature rumours of her death.^{xxxiii} With careful sifting, a more exhaustive search for the single term ‘star’, which brings up thousands of returns unrelated to the screen star, may well bring up earlier uses.

It is a fool’s game to try and claim the ‘first’ instance of something, for others will surely be found, but we soon find instances of Apollos emerging in the 1910s. *Motion Picture Story Magazine* was typical of earlier fan-magazines with its focus on film stories and general features rather than stars, the divinised film star nonetheless emerges strongly amid their letters pages. While no-doubt echoing wider discourses on celebrity, this evidences the way that the heightened mythical treatment of the star is not just a matter of publicity puff, but can be sculpted by the fans themselves as they respond to the emergent idols of the screen. As Richard Abel and Amy Rogers argue, through encouraging such articulate self-expression, fan-magazines: ‘helped form a moviegoing public, one that could imagine itself as a vital participant in the film industry’s financial and creative viability rather than as a disparate group of passive onlookers’.^{xxxiv} Thus James Cruze steps fully formed in a remarkable poem contributed by ‘X.Y.Z., from Milwaukee’ to the January 1913 issue.^{xxxv} Framing the logo of Thanhouser Company, for which Cruze worked, and a small ink sketch of the star, the verse contains most of the attributes found in much later divinized discourses of the 1920s, here already fully formed. Myth and folklore provided familiar reference points for the romantic flights of fancy found in fan poems, often underscored by the irresolvable yearning associated with stardom’s regime of presence and yet absence as discussed by John Ellis^{xxxvi} – the same issue contains a poem paying tribute to Lillian Walker with allusions to Cupid, Lorelei and with ‘all the spells of Circe’ apparently no match for the ‘dimple on her cheek’.^{xxxvii} The nine stanzas of ‘X.Y.Z.’s verse are extraordinary, and show the film fan drawing from other cultural forms in making sense of the particular phenomena of screen stardom, and articulate a discourse to evoke it. The poem begins and ends with a tone that fits the trope of ‘shadow love’ common to many fan poems of the 1910s,^{xxxviii} where fans pay tribute to a star whose illusory nature beguiles and frustrates their desire in equal measure. Here, the star is a ‘hero of my dream’ whom they’ve never met, and then finally ‘..when he’s not upon the screen / My interest then I lose.’ Yet in between, the object of the fan’s desire is rendered in more tangible and familiar forms. The second stanza introduces the physical attributes of the star, with his ‘..manly face; / His form is like Apollo, fair; / His actions full of grace.’ The words negotiate the potential passivity of ‘fair’ and ‘grace’ with a stress on action with the latter, which, particularly

with the direct comparison to 'Apollo', start to evoke 18th and 19th century receptions of classical sculpture, most famously those of pioneering German art historian, Johann Winckelmann. The narrator states that they see 'My handsome Grecian god' all the day, and then in the fifth and sixth stanzas presents the fantasy of being first a painter, and then a sculptor. In the first they paint Cruze as 'the great Horatius', the heroic Roman officer, perhaps recalling artworks such as Charles Le Brun's 1640s allegorical treatment of the story from Livy's historical account.^{xxxix} While this puts the star within a historical frame as 'my hero grand', the second presents a stronger sense of agency in fan construction of the star, and a much more culturally familiar subject, crucial if the reference is to resonate, and then proliferate, with other fans. It reads: 'I dream that I'm a sculptor, / And I make this idol dear / Of the very finest marble, / Like Apollo Belvedere.' It is no surprise to see the Apollo Belvedere providing the ideal male form here. Since Winckelmann was sent into raptures on the Hellenistic sculpture in his 1764 *History of the Art of Antiquity*, claiming it to be 'the highest ideal of art among all the works of antiquity to have escaped its destruction', the statue has become synonymous with the finest artistic achievement of the perceived cradle of Western civilisation, ancient Greece, and at the same time an ideal of male beauty that survives miraculously from the past as if to provide a template by which modern pretenders to beauty must be judged.^{xl} Indeed, those sculptures have provided inspiration for aspiring celebrities since the 18th century paintings of Joshua Reynolds with his famed 'historical style' that posed contemporary society in poses that drew from classical forms, including the Apollo Belvedere.^{xli}

Aided by Winckelmann's descriptions, and innumerable engravings, paintings and plaster copies since, the Apollo has become culturally familiar as a type, with the god's associations with light and music proving felicitously resonant for the emergent art of cinema. 'X.Y.Z.'s poem twice asserts that Cruze is 'like' Apollo, but also, in another part of the verse, that he '...he always seems to be / Apollo in disguise', and thus *is* the classical god in another guise, with that 'seems' acting as a caveat that acknowledges the flight of fancy even as it asserts it. Indeed, most striking is the invocation of the Pygmalion myth. This comes through the aforementioned imaginative sculpting of the star, and also the seventh stanza that cites gracious ancient gods (usually Venus), that '...gave life unto the statue / That the sculptor loved so dear.' Here, the fan echoes Winckelmann's poetic confession that the statues makes him 'forget all else' and transport him to ancient Greece, and that his sketch of Apollo '...seems to take on life and movement, like Pygmalion's beauty'.^{xlii} As I have indicated above in relation to Novello, it was cinema, of course, that would most fully realise the act of bringing apparent life from art with its motion pictures, with the star its greatest exponent. That phrase, 'Apollo in disguise', connects the two fans of 1906 and 1913, and their recognition that screen stars are in effect the old idols in a new guise, and through the act of remarking upon this, they have each embellished the nascent discourse of the screen star, and provided inspiration for many future fans. Too easily dismissed as trite fantasy, or 'foolish dreaming' as 'X.Y.Z.' puts it, such fan poetry reveals the very mechanisms of film stardom, and the

discourse that can be appropriated and reassembled by imaginative, and clearly passionate, fans. Here, the keywords 'Apollo' (and 'Apollo Belvedere'), 'Horatius', 'Grecian god', 'hero', 'idol' evoke the star, who is embellished by attributes 'manly', 'fair', 'handsome', 'actions full of grace' and a framing atmosphere of art, dreams, with Cruze's eyes 'like the stars of midnight'. Cruze is not described as a 'star', but a 'picture player', and yet all the qualities of the star are here as a larger-than-life figure upon a pedestal, associated with dreams, desire, light, and art. With its implied motion and stillness, presence and absence, this is a highly eloquent portrayal of what a screen star looks like, and what it feels like to be a fan and look at them, and evidence of how rich and insightful fan poems, and fan-magazines, can be to the researcher.

Conclusion

The examples discussed in this chapter indicate that while 'divinised' discourses of stardom were present from the outset of screen stardom, and preceded it in other forms, asserting that a star shares qualities of Venus or Apollo was also a provocative move. Thus as well as serving as a readymade marketing tool for the studios, for fan-magazines, this heightened discourse was guaranteed to produce a reaction from its readers for or against a favourite star, and debates sell magazines. While usually keeping the tone of these references playful, a further level of 'plausible deniability' is accomplished by the magazines by alternating positions on divinised stardom. Thus while a *Photoplay* editorial in 1928 stated that 'idol worship is no more' and that 'PHOTOPLAY's circulation is increasing because this magazine is not trying to create gods and goddesses', it would continue to do exactly that, at least in part.^{xliii} For example, the March 1930 issue printed a letter arguing that 'the movies are exercising an influence in developing Venuses and Adonises among our young people, just as fine statuary influenced the development of personal beauty among the Ancient Greeks'.^{xliv} Three issues later, however, the feature 'Goodbye, Apollo!', informs us that 'something pretty terrible has happened to this Greek God business. If the polymer dollars ever showed up at the studio they will be put to work shifting scenery...Without any warning whatever the boys with the profiles and the dreamy eyes have been given a race for the money by gents with little or no claim to manly beauty'.^{xlv} There are many other examples, with either a magazine shifting positions to play to all tastes, or allowing a careful selection of letters to stir affection, or contempt, amid the fans themselves.

The digital revolution that continues to transform online archives presents great opportunities for research, and will certainly be an asset as I undertake my current research, which explores what happens to the divinised discourses discussed in this chapter from the 1930s onwards. Of course, keyword searches need to be treated with caution. One must watch for variant spellings ('Rudolph' and 'Rodolph', 'Novarro' and 'Navarro', etc.), and while digital searches can bring up serendipitous discoveries, one can miss gems that one would find when browsing paper resources, particularly in terms of visual material invisible to keyword searches, as well as the loss of the tactility of the physical object. Digitised magazines can be turned page-by-page, but there is a greater tendency to skip. A bonus of the Lantern search is that by default it

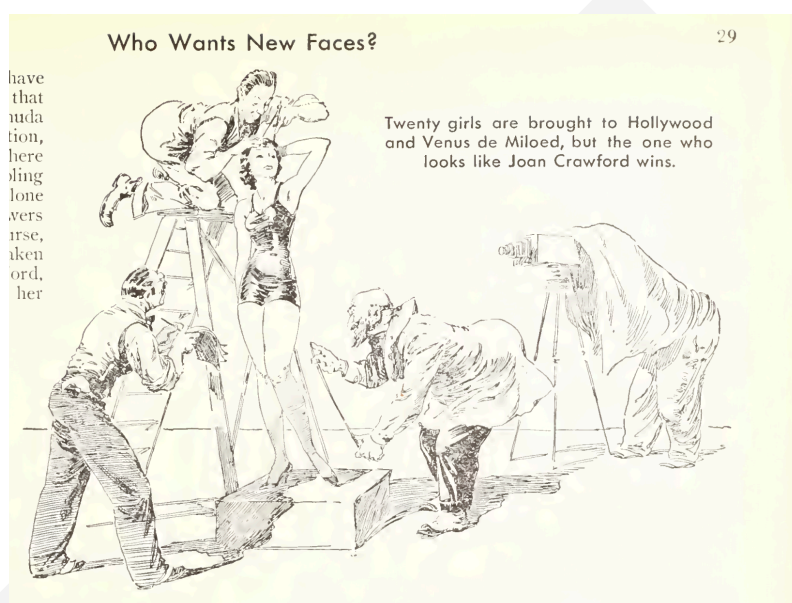


Figure 6

returns results from places one might otherwise not have had the time, or foresight, to consult. In revisiting Ivor Novello, I have found articles in publications such as *The Film Daily* that have filled gaps in my knowledge about him, particularly in terms of his US reception. Lantern has enabled me to readily find evidence for the way Apollo, for example, was a key figure in star discourse much earlier than I had previously thought, and so has opened up a new historical context for me.

As we have seen, although the more divinized forms of stardom were predicted to fall by the end of the 1920s, they endured in many forms and are still with us today. Arguably the fan-magazines images and features became even more tongue-in-cheek, to have their cake and eat it aligning stars with the gods of the past, and yet maintaining distance. With this, and most significantly, Hollywood having built up its own history of idols. I'll conclude with a delightful 1934 illustration from *Picture-Play*, which contemplates this theme (fig.6).^{xlvi} Here, we see a woman standing upon a pedestal in classical pose, very much in the manner of a pose Joan Crawford performed six years earlier in *Photoplay's* 'Olympus Moves to Hollywood' feature, but this time, we are told that 'Twenty girls are brought to Hollywood and Venus de Miloed, but the one who looks like Joan Crawford wins'. This elegantly summarises the whole process of 'de

Miloin'g' stars that we have seen, and one that goes back centuries. It also indicates how these idols of prior ages have become increasingly submerged beneath the images of later icons, but not lost. The figures that emerge are strikingly contemporary in their appeal, but still bearing the traces of the past like a palimpsest, with the fan-magazine our ideal guide in our search to bring these traces to light.

Thanks to David Cobbett.

ⁱ *Picture Show* 9 February 1924, 6

ⁱⁱ See Michael Williams, *Film Stardom, Myth and Classicism: The Rise of Hollywood's Gods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.1-3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Exhibitor's Herald*, 3 March 1923, 19.

^{iv} For discussion on these different approaches to research see the essays contained in Charles R. Acland and Eric Hoyt eds., *The Arclight Guidebook to Media History and the Digital Humanities*, (Falmer: Reframe Books, 2016), URL: <http://projectarclight.org/book/>; particularly Haidee Wasson's 'The Quick Search and Slow Scholarship: Researching Film Formats' 31-44.

^v *Motion Picture Magazine*, March 1923, 77.

^{vi} *Motion Picture Magazine*, May 1923, 56.

^{vii} Advertisements for *The Rat*, *The Film Daily*, 16 September 1926, 5; 15 September, 1926, 5.

^{viii} Helen Klumph, 'Griffith's Choice', *Picture-Play*, March 1923, 42-43, 86. Grab.

^{ix} Advertisement for *The Bohemian Girl*, *The Film Daily*, 11 February 1923, 18.

^x Henry Carr, 'What is the Mystery of Ramon Novarro?', *Motion Picture Classic*, October 1925.

^{xi} Heather Addison, "'Must the Players Keep Young?': Early Hollywood's Cult of Youth", *Cinema Journal*, vol. 45, no. 4, Summer 2006, 3-25.

^{xii} See Michael Williams, *Ivor Novello: Screen Idol* (London: BFI, 2003).

^{xiii} Edith Nepean, 'The War Note', *Picture Show*, 28 June 1926, 20.

^{xiv} Richard Dyer, 'Charisma' in Christine Gledhill ed., *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, London, Routledge, pp.57-59

^{xv} See Lynda Nead, 'The Haunted Gallery' in *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c.1900* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 45-105. I have also written on this theme in 'Swanson Venus and Apollo Arlen: Sculpting the Star Body'; in Williams 2012, pp. 54-81.

^{xvi} 'The Shadow that Lives', *Photoplay* April 1916, 66.

^{xvii} Sydney W. Carroll, *Daily Telegraph*, 8 November 1934.

^{xviii} *The Film Index*, 26 November 1910, 24.

^{xix} Herbert Howe, 'Close-Ups & Long Shots', *Photoplay*, August 1923, 45.

^{xx} Herbert Howe, 'A Prediction', *Photoplay*, May 1924, 131.

^{xxi} I discuss this image in more detail in: 'Gloria Swanson as Venus: Silent Stardom, Antiquity and the Classical Vernacular' in Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke eds., *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2013), 125-144.

^{xxii} *Photoplay*, May 1926, 36; Constance Palmer Littlefield, 'The Greek God from Mexico', *Picture Play*, August 1923, 56.

^{xxiii} 'What the Fans Think', *Picture-Play*, June 1928, 10.

^{xxiv} "'The O's Have It!'", *Pictures and the Picturegoer*, January 1924, 20-21.

^{xxv} *The Film Daily*, 10 June 1923, 4; *Exhibitor's Herald*, 9 June 1923, 45; *The Educational Screen*, February 1924, 61.

^{xxvi} *The Moving Picture World*, 24 March 1923, 444.

^{xxvii} Delight Evans, 'A Flyer in Art', *Screenland*, November 1923, 54-55, 100.

^{xxviii} *The New York Times*, 11th June 1928. p.27.

^{xxix} Review of *The Rat* (London), *Variety* 25 June 1924, 17.

^{xxx} Ralph Wheelwright, 'The Swedish Sphinx Speaks', *Screenland* September 1929, 44-45, 95.

^{xxxi} *Motion Picture Herald*, April 1931, 17.

^{xxxii} 'Josephine Gro.', 'Miss Clipper's Anecdotes, Personalities and Comments, Concerning Stage Folk and Sometimes Others', *New York Clipper*, August 4 1906, 626.

^{xxxiii} "'Circusing" 2 April 1910, 6; 'Ovation for Film Star in St. Louis', *Variety*, 9 April 1910, 17. Arclight search performed on 9/9/16.

^{xxxiv} Richard Abel and Amy Rogers, 'Early Motion Pictures and Popular Print Culture: A Web Of Ephemera', in Christine Bold Ed., *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture, Vol. 6, US Popular Print Culture 1860 to 1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 191-210, (p.200).

^{xxxv} 'Appreciation and Criticisms of Popular Plays and Players by Our Readers', *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, January 1913, 172.

^{xxxvi} John Ellis, 'Stars as a Cinematic Phenomenon', *Visible Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp.91-108.

^{xxxvii} Anonymous, 'Appreciation and Criticisms of Popular Plays and Players by Our Readers', *The Motion Picture Story Magazine*, January 1913, 168.

^{xxxviii} See Michael Williams, *Film Stardom, Myth and Classicism: The Rise of Hollywood's Gods* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp.40-38.

^{xxxix} See <http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/explore-the-collection/201-250/horatus-cocles-defending-the-bridge/> [accessed 8/9/16].

^{xl} Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2006), p.333.

^{xli} See Martin Postle ed., *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

^{xlii} Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2006), p.334.

^{xliiii} James L. Quirk, 'Close-Ups and Long-Shots', *Photoplay*, November 1928, 29.

^{xliiv} 'Brickbats & Bouquets', *Photoplay* March 1930, 118.

^{xli v} *Photoplay* June 1930, 70, 122 (70).

^{xli vi} Regina Cannon, 'Who Wants New Faces?', *Picture Play*, April 1934, 29.