SILENCING THE NEW WOMAN: ETHNIC AND SOCIAL MOBILITY IN THE MELODRAMAS OF NORMA TALMADGE

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The silent film star whose voice prevented him or her from making the transition to the talkies is a well-known figure in Hollywood lore. The voices of some stars supposedly did not match the personas they established in the silent era, and, according to the legend, technological progress consigned these stars to the footnotes of film history.

John Gilbert's highly publicized case is the male touchstone of this legend, but perhaps the most prominent female star whose voice allegedly ruined her silent era popularity is Norma Talmadge. In 1924, a Photoplay contest named Talmadge America's most popular female movie star. In 1930, she made two critically and commercially unsuccessful talkies (New York Nights and Du Barry—Woman of Passion), and she never again appeared on screen, supposedly because her voice did not match her star image (Cook 250).

What does it mean for an actor's voice not to match his/her persona? In this article, I am less concerned with why Talmadge the actual woman retired from Hollywood than I am with exploring Talmadge's star persona in the 1920s. The last power of the silent-star-killed-by-sound myth makes the legend just as interesting as the question of why Talmadge left the cinema. The focus of this article is the public discourses that provide the background for Talmadge's departure.

Talmadge the New Woman

Norma Talmadge repeatedly played "mae ern" women who moved upward in socioeconomic status from humble beginnings enacting a feminine version of the American dream of being able to transcend class origins. In The Lady (1925), Polly Pei (Talmadge), a second-rate singer, becomes the owner of a cafe, though her advance comes at considerable emotional cost. One of her most famous films of the teens is The Secretary (1916), Talmadge plays a character who proves herself worthy belonging to the upper-class family she works for, and she marries the son. The Sit on the Door (1921) shows another social rise through marriage, but Within the Lc (1923) presents perhaps the most extreme upward movement—from an ex-convict to the wife of a rich gentleman.

While these characters as a group may seem particularly modern in light of today's mores (since their advances came primarily...
through marriage), they represented the New Woman of the 1920s. The New Woman was able to pursue her ambitions in the business world and could succeed with hard work and intelligence, but these ambitions were subservient to a “higher” calling: marriage, family, and domestic submission. The New Woman discourse recognized and validated the growing ranks of American women who “chose” to work outside the home to satisfy the national need for a larger workforce. At the same time, the discourse attempted to circumscribe any potential gains in women’s power by positioning the workplace as simply a transitional step toward the establishment of home and family (Ryan 508–9).

The New Woman was much discussed in popular magazines. The *Ladies’ Home Journal* defined her as someone who knew the rewards of both the workplace and the home and who made the “right” choice of her own free will:

> We have eaten the apple and never again shall we be good in a pre-Adamite, pre-woman-movement sense. Now, our conduct shall be the result of intelligent choice, and when we elect to live according to the older doctrines it shall be because we recognize truth, not merely obeying [old doctrines] with the unquestioning unintelligence of the medieval or Victorian woman. In the full flood-light of understanding and free will we shall choose the better way (Abbott 154).

The “better way” clearly was to choose the home and family, as did the protagonists of *The Social Secretary* and *The Sign on the Door*. Such women had seen the more active sexuality and power of twenties’ flappers and vamps and had resolved the contradictions of femininity by freely choosing the more passive sexuality of the traditional wife and mother. These characters would be read as a particular type of “modern” working women—successful New Women.\(^4\)

Not only did Talmadge’s characters epitomize the New Woman, but Talmadge herself was described in the fan discourse as a successful New Woman, one with the perfect combination of business assertiveness and domestic submission to her successful husband. In 1916, Talmadge, then a Vitagraph actress from a working-class background, married Joseph Schenck, a film exhibitor. He turned producer and formed the Norma Talmadge Film Corporation and released their films through First National and later through United Artists, the studio he was to head. This powerful, financially advantageous partnership remained in place throughout the 1920s, when Talmadge’s career was at its apex of popularity.\(^5\)

Talmadge the businesswoman maintained almost as high a profile as Talmadge the actress. In a *Ladies’ Home Journal* article entitled “Women in Business,” Talmadge is the only figure named from the motion picture industry (Fleischman 24). A fan magazine described “Norma Talmadge, Inc.” as “one of our busiest little American institutions” (Norma Talmadge clipping file [hereafter NTF]).\(^6\) One article boasts that Talmadge earned $5 million in an eight-year period during the 1920s. “Where most people invest in one house and lot, Norma Talmadge goes in for apartment houses and office buildings” (NTF).

The popular discourse on Talmadge alludes to the difficulties of maintaining the contradiction between powerful businesswoman and subordinate wife: “The most famous woman in Hollywood is Norma Talmadge. The least known woman in Hollywood is Mrs. Joseph Schenck” (NTF). Talmadge’s image calls into question the seeming ease with which the New Woman balances her contradictory roles, though the difficulties of maintaining this position are not explored.

Norma Talmadge’s characters and her off-screen biography create a composite portrait of a woman who moved from poverty to riches without being hindered by class boundaries. The difficulties of adapting one-self to higher class mores are barely acknowledged. In this version of the American myth, individual courage and ability override the class restrictions of one’s origins.

The Accessible/Aloof Heart: Talmadge and Melodrama

Talmadge’s stories of social mobility figured prominently in the popular culture of 1920s women, particularly because she was one of the foremost practitioners of melodrama. Melodrama is a critical category that significantly predates the 1920s, having its roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century spectacular theater, the sentimental novel, and other forms (Brooks). Thomas Elsaesser suggests that a concept as notoriously slippery as melodrama can best be defined in terms of a characteristic devices, elements, and motifs. Thus, melodrama is a narrative mode dependent on misrecognitions, narrative paralysis, rapid shifts in tone, and, perhaps most important, an emphasis on concealing emotion from other characters while simultaneously seeming to offer the audience access to a character’s interior states.

In melodramas such as the ones Talmadge specialized in, the audience must be given access to the female protagonist’s internal states for the film to be readable.\(^7\) The melodrama promises us a glimpse of the “real” woman underneath the exterior, the spectacle of raw, conflicted, excessive, feminine emotions. As Laura Mulvey argues, these women are frequently caught between the contradictory demands society makes on femininity, between the passivity of the “lady” and a more active, passionate sexuality. In trying to resolve these contradictory emotions into a smooth narrative progression, the Hollywood melodrama characteristically swings from one emotional extreme to another, revealing what Elsaesser terms an “inherent dialectic” (182) that cannot be resolved. Because the melodrama cannot fully resolve the problem of femininity, it presents the contradictions of femininity as a series of rapid emotional ups and downs.

Film has developed a set of narrative devices to reveal the protagonist’s emotions and thoughts (principally the closeup, but also more invasive strategies such as hypnosis and psychoanalysis). Talmadge’s melodramas use several particular narrative and mise-en-scène patterns to provide the audience with privileged access to her emotions in flux. These devices are important if we are to understand how Norma Talmadge gained her popular reputation as “the greatest emotional actress of the screen” (NTF).

Many of Talmadge’s films feature characters who are intricately preparing to lie thereby showing a character getting ready to perform just as Talmadge the actress prepares to act in a scene (further linking her on-screen characters and her off-screen persona as an actress). In *The Lady*, for instance, Polly Pearl (Talmadge) must sing a song on stage to stall the men who have come to take her baby. Backstage she is distraught at the prospect of losing her child; we then see her steel herself to make a calm entrance to chat with the men. Directors often foreground Talmadge making these rapid emotional changes to prepare for an entrance, and these become a kind of set piece in Talmadge films.

Frequently, Talmadge films depend on the character making a crucial decision, and we watch as she silently enacts a multistage decision-making process. The plot of *Th Song of Love* (1923) depends on whether Noorma-hal (Talmadge) will betray Ram lika’s hiding place to arresting officers, even if this causes her uncle to be arrested in stead. She walks toward his hiding place manages a brave smile, considers, and finally sits on the hiding place, bravely keeping the secret from the officers while simultaneously exposing her decision-making process to the audience. Talmadge glance at people and at narratively significant objects, revealing a different emotional expression at each stage. In this way, she tells graphs a conventionally coded sequence of emotions, silently giving us access to rapid changes in her inner thought processes.\(^8\)
It is not surprising that an actress offering such apparent access to inner states was described in popular discourse as “the emotional queen of the screen.” According to fan magazines, “She does not act as much from the mind as from the heart,” and the discourses assure us that we can trust the heart we see on screen because of Talmadge’s emotional honesty. Over and over, the fan magazines use such phrases as “natural,” “personal,” and “total lack of conscious mannerism.” “She is real. She does not pose. She has no affectations,” we are told. A newspaper review tells us that Talmadge’s emotional truth transcends the conventions of the genre, that she “puts real pathos in when it could be melodrama if not played sincerely” (NTF).

Just as earlier audiences pieced together “picture personalities” over a range of film performances (deCordova, 1920s audiences could discover Talmadge’s “personality” through her films. Each new Norma Talmadge film gave her audience an opportunity to gain more insight into the “real” Norma Talmadge, whose personality, as a fan magazine said, “is so compelling you like her no matter how poor the picture.” With each picture the Talmadge persona gains more and more detail, making her “an ever changing and broadening personality” (NTF).

Popular discourse also portrayed another part of this picture personality, a facet that contradicted Talmadge’s purported emotional honesty. Much of the publicity portrayed her as “aloof,” “regal,” “stately,” even “snobbish,” emphasizing the difficulty of penetrating to the core of the real Talmadge. She is “always reserved, always immaculately groomed, rather aloof save to her friends, yet the idol of the film colony” (NTF).

The films also show Talmadge’s capacity to conceal her real feelings. Over and over Talmadge is placed in the mise-en-scène in such a way that she hides her facial expressions from other characters in the scene (as in the scenes mentioned above). Though this technique lets the audience freely read her emotions, it also acknowledges that Talmadge is more than capable of concealing those inner states.

This hauteur reported in the popular press might have interfered with Talmadge’s position as an accessible idol of film audiences. However, in her case, as in Garbo’s, this aloofness became part of a fairly common Hollywood publicity strategy to create a sense of mystery about a star. This distancing strategy balances the supposedly easy access to Talmadge’s inner feelings that melodrama promises to audiences.

As a fan magazine said, the resulting combination is an enigma: “Even her friends can’t decide which Norma they prefer. . . . Norma . . . a woman . . . a paradox . . . a riddle!” (NTF). The combination of aloofness and emotional accessibility in the films and the popular press epitomizes the ideological contradictions of 1920s femininity. Talmadge’s melodramatic technique promises us a glimpse of the spectacle of feminine emotions, but those same techniques and the extrafilmic discourse simultaneously acknowledge her unknowability.

The Other Talmadge

When Talmadge was not playing a white woman relatively unbound by the American class system, she portrayed a large range of racial Others. Some of Talmadge’s roles are Othered because the films are set in the remote past, following the popular trend of the historical melodrama. In Smilin’ Through (1922), for example, she plays Moonyeem, an Irish beauty. The Dove (1927) is set in a mythical semitropical land, where she plays Dolores, a dancehall girl known as “The Dove.” In The Passion Flower (1921), she plays another exotic woman with both a given name and a romantic title: Acacia, the Passion Flower. In Heart of Wetona (1924), Talmadge portrays an American Indian; in Kiki (1926), she’s a Parisian gamine; and in Forbidden City (1918), she’s an Asian named Sansan. The Song of Love presents Talmadge in perhaps her most explicitly erotic and exotic role: as the Arabian charmer Noorma-hal (the name obviously linking the star with the role), who dances seductively for men.

In Werner Sollers’ terms, Norma Talmadge positions ethnicity as a matter of consent (emphasizing the individual as a free agent choosing his/her destiny), while many other discourses identify race as a matter of descent (hereditary blood lines) (6). Just as Talmadge’s characters are able to cross class lines within an individual film, Talmadge the actress can be transformed from Asian to Native American from film to film. Talmadge the racial masquerader embodies what Mark Winokur calls the American “fantasy about the ability to create not only one’s persona, but also one’s origins” (13–14), eluding entrapment within racial categories.

The American cinema has had many racial masqueraders, including Al Jolson’s blackfaced minstrel singer in The Jazz Singer (1927) and Eddie Cantor’s Jewish “Indian” in Whoopie! (1930). Notably, only white people are able to cross the cinema’s racial lines, creating another area of privilege over those whose identities (cinematic or otherwise) are bound to their skin color. Whiteness is not read as a particularizing quality. It is both everything and nothing, Richard Dyer says, allowing white identities to become invisible and to be subsumed into other racial identities (“White” 45). As Michael Rogin notes, “Unlike other racially stigmatized groups, white immigrants can put on and take off their mark of difference” (“Making America Home” 1057).

Such racial masquerade not only gives whites the potential to try on Other subjectivities, but it opens up possibilities of expression that are generally repressed in mainstream white America. Blackface allowed the minstrel to engage in an intensity and range of emotional expressiveness that would not be allowed in mainstream white society. Extremes of emotion are thus displaced onto the Other (whose behavior is seen as being less proscribed by civilizing forces).

Note the significance of makeup in transforming these white men into racial Others. Obviously, blackface is a highly visible and theatrical strategy for masquerade, but white ethnicities also used more naturalistic makeup techniques to transform themselves. Warner Oland, for instance, used false beards and eyebrows to make the transition from the old Jewish cantor in The Jazz Singer to the Asian villain in Old San Francisco (1927).

Like other white performers who crosseyed racial lines, Norma Talmadge was given privileged status to put on the Other, to enact a culturally mediated fiction of changing one’s origins by crossing racial lines. Unlike Jolson and Oland, however, she did not depend on makeup to transform herself from one melodramatically expressive ethnic type to another. Instead, she used costume to signify racial Otherness.

At several points in the popular discourse including in at least one published interview, Talmadge asserts that a change in dramatic role is equivalent to a change in feminine costume: “I simply dress the part and feel the part and that seems to be all that is necessary.” To change from Arab to Native American costume is to change from Noorma-hal to Wetona. The emotion of a melodramatic actress are similarly malleable: “Every emotion has its color tone equivalent, and in the making of a photo play one must dress one’s emotions in corresponding hues.” In advice to the New Woman, Talmadge suggests the importance of the masquerade as the key to feminine advancement in the everyday world: “If your mind is awake to the possibilities that lie in proper dressing, it will also be awake to...
other things of interest. And therein lies the secret of a charming personality” (NTF).

One might assume that a very pale-skinned woman such as Norma Talmadge would also require strong makeup to embody racial Others. Unlike white men, however, Talmadge did not require culturally coded makeup, as if Talmadge’s personality were malleable enough to cross racial lines without having to use obvious makeup props, as if changing ethnicities for her were as easy as changing clothing.

This distinction between white man’s and white woman’s racial masquerades recalls Mary Ann Doane’s discussion of femininity as masquerade (“Film and the Masquerade”). Femininity as constituted by our society is a position of inadequacy, and the woman attempts to occupy more socially viable positions by means of a kind of transvestitism, by pretending that she is an Other. The woman can do this because femininity itself is constituted as a masquerade hiding the woman’s nonidentity. Norma Talmadge need not use clearly marked makeup to transform herself into an Other, since her femininity already constitutes her as a masquerade.11

On screen, Norma Talmadge could operate within the fairly broad range of expression accorded to a woman in a woman’s genre. By playing many different ethnic roles, she could exploit the even broader range of emotional expressivity accorded to racial Others. Using the melodramatic techniques described earlier, Talmadge offered the spectacle of “exotic” emotions. Taking advantage of the racial mobility given to her by her whiteness and the “natural” masquerade abilities of the feminine, she portrayed an unprecedented variety of ethnicities and promised emotional access into these Other subjectivities.

**Many Talmacades**

Unlike other actresses who performed in the melodramas of the 1920s, Talmadge did not build a core character who could simply be followed from film to film (Mary Pickford’s “Little Mary,” for example12). Reading Talmadge’s performances across a variety of film texts emphasizes Talmadge the actress and her ability to transcend racial, ethnic, and class boundaries. In 1926, Adela Rogers St. Johns called Talmadge “our one and only great actress,” citing her versatility as the distinctive factor that favored Talmadge over Pickford, Lillian Gish, and others:

With Norma Talmadge every part is a separate and distinct creation. And when you see her on the screen, you never see Norma Talmadge. You, as an audience, know absolutely nothing of the woman Norma Talmadge. . . . Probably 90% of her audiences do not realize there is any art or study or technique behind her performances (NTF).

St. Johns tersely states the problem posed by a versatile actress in melodramas. Since melodrama promises us access into a person’s internal emotions, one expects to see the “real” person when she appears on screen. Yet when one tries to piece together a versatile actress’s “personality” from intertextual readings, the range of characterizations thwarts the attempt to create a unified personality. The only way to resolve Mooneyen, Sansan, Yolanda de Breux, Acaicia, Noorma-hal, Polly Pearl, the Duchesse de Langeais, and the Social Secretary is to posit Talmadge as a “great actress,” as a masquerader par excellence, as St. Johns does. The “real” Talmadge is the actress gifted enough to portray different ethnicities and classes simply by showing us her extreme emotions, not by using makeup.

Talmadge’s versatility is emphasized not only across film texts but also within individual films. In her roles as a social mover, we see her transform Galatea-like from a lower-class woman into a member of the aristocracy (in Within the Law, for instance). Also, she plays stage performers in several films (Kiki, New York Nights, The Dove), enabling us to see both on-stage and backstage versions of the same character.

Significantly, several of her most popular films show Talmadge portraying multiple roles. In Yes or No (1920), she played two women who took different stands toward marital temptation, with predictably moral results. In Smiles: Through, she portrayed Mooneyen, who is killed on the day of her wedding; she also played Kathleen, who falls in love with the groom’s son 20 years later. In Secrets, she played a woman in her youth and in her old age (“I changed my age with every change of costume”) (NTF). These films overtly inscribe Talmadge’s versatility, her ability to occupy multiple positions in the text. The films encourage the fantasy that one can effortlessly move from one subject position to another by shaping one’s inner being.

If anything can be said to be unique about Norma Talmadge in the 1920s, it is this foregrounded discourse on versatilit. Certainly there were many actresses in the silent era who performed in melodramas (e.g., Pickford and Gish13), and other actors portrayed ethnic and racial types (e.g., Valentino) or played resourceful New Women rising through the social strata. Talmadge, however, foregrounded her versatility more than any other leading actress of comparable popularity in the period.14

This emphasis further highlighted the contradictions of gender, class, and ethnicity that Talmadge embodied. Talmadge, like many stars, was situated at the crossing of several key contradictory discourses, while maintaining a necessarily tenuous balance. This balancing act was further endangered by Talmadge’s range of impersonations and foregrounded versatility, which makes it difficult to construct a unified personality. Regardless of how well Talmadge spoke, it would be difficult for any voice to match the discursive position she occupied in the silent cinema.15

The Talking Talmadge

Western metaphysics has fostered the illusion that speech is able to express the speaker’s inner essence, that it is “part” of him or her. It locates the subject of speech in the same ontological space as the speaking subject, so that the former seems a natural outgrowth of the latter (Silverman 43).

When audiences lined up to see and hear Norma Talmadge in New York Nights or Du Barry—Woman of Passion, they reasonably could expect to gain an access they’d never had before into the “inner truth” of the “real” Talmadge, the person at the juncture of the several discourses outlined in this article. The human voice promised audiences insight into Talmadge’s interior, a promise that was compounded by the similar drive in the melodrama to penetrate the woman’s exterior.

How was Norma Talmadge’s voice perceived by her contemporaries? The myth of the silent-star-destroyed-by-sound emphasizes the harsher judgments, such as that of *Time* magazine:

Norma Talmadge plays less pompously than might be expected, but people who liked her program pictures in the old days may hope that this will be the last attempt to establish her as a great figure in sound pictures. However, her diction is improving; in her first dialog effort she talked like an elocution pupil; this time she talks like an elocution teacher (“Du Barry”).

Listening closely to a Talmadge talkie, however, one does not notice any vocal qualitie: that are not characteristic of early sound films in general. Her speech is somewhat overly precise, but so is the speech in many sound transition films. In fact, several contemporary reviewers did not even make of her voice, and some praised he performance. The Chicago Daily Tribune, for example, penned New York Nights bu
Talmadge appears not to be able to control these occasional slips into overly coached or too colloquial diction. If she had switched from lower-class to higher-class enunciation when her character (Du Barry, for instance) moved from humble beginnings to noble surroundings, this shift would have reinforced Talmadge’s claim that she had a versatile acting style. She once again might have been able to cross class boundaries in true New Woman fashion. Instead, these erratic slips in pronunciation create the unsettling sense of an unstable, disunified identity that almost randomly switches class associations.

Talmadge’s uneven voice not only creates the potential for displeasure within the audience of a particular film; it also calls for revision of her persona. Obviously, the “real” Talmadge revealed in the sound cinema is not even capable of impersonating a single cohesive character. If she had difficulty in maintaining the basic fiction of a cohesive subject position in the sound cinema, the “real” Talmadge was certainly incapable of reenacting her versatile range of silent cinema types. In the talkies, Talmadge the masquerader was bound by the limitations of her body.

Kaja Silverman says that “within classic cinema, woman’s psyche is only a further extension of her body—its other side, or, to be more precise, its inside” (64). The cinematic apparatus works hard to maintain this fiction, invisibly synchronizing the image of the performer’s body and “a voice to match.” Silverman would explain Talmadge’s failure in the sound cinema as a moment of rupture in the seamless suturing of the female voice to the female body. Following Silverman’s reasoning, Talmadge’s voice did not fulfill the expectations created by her body, therefore exposing the constructed nature of the apparatus.

Silverman’s assertions regarding the pressure in the classic cinema to match the female voice and body are convincing, but her claim does not fully explain the disjunction in Du Barry—Woman of Passion. To explain this moment purely in terms of gender is to miss much historical specificity. Certainly the fact that Talmadge is a woman is significant, but other discourses are important in the construction of her persona. Melodrama and sound promised privileged access to Talmadge’s exotic Other, but when “the French accents are variable in every character,” the interior of Talmadge’s French paramour becomes inconsistent (“Du Barry,” Variety 15).

Speech in the cinema not only reveals the supposed continuity between a character’s exterior and interior, it also “guarantees immediacy and presence in the system of absence that is cinema” (Silverman 43). The cinematic image necessarily implies the absence of the depicted object, and the apparatus works hard to imbue the cinema with a sense of “presence,” to disguise and disavow the replacement of signified with signifier. The spoken voice is often seen as a way of giving the image presence that would otherwise be lacking. Doane notes that “the addition of sound to the cinema introduces the possibility of re-presenting a fuller (and organically unified) body” (“Voice in the Cinema” 567).

Doane’s and Silverman’s conception of the cinema is based too much on ex post facto knowledge of the dominant direction the cinema would take after the introduction of sound technology. The absence of the signified has always existed in the cinema and was masked by piano, organ, and orchestra accompaniment. It is too easy to assume that the sound cinema (particularly synchronized voices) is part of a natural progression of technological advances to overcome the threatening absence of the signified, as if the sound cinema was waiting to be discovered as the best solution to a preexisting problem. It is easy to posit filmmakers as struggling to overcome the “liabilities” of the silent cinema.

Unless proven otherwise, we should assume that the silent cinema found its silence to be
as much an asset as a liability. Suggesting that synchronous speech gives a sense of “presence” to the performer’s body would indicate that silent film performers were perceived as having less “presence.” Though this may seem to be true to audiences raised on the sound cinema, we must question whether this would have been true for audiences in the sound transition period. In fact, the absence of sound may have freed silent filmmakers to create effects that would not be possible with the greater “presence” of sound.20

Silent film enabled Talmadge to occupy a variety of positions without calling specific attention to possible contradictions among them. Audiences hearing her voice for the first time did not get a sense of the “fuller and more unified body” Doane and Silverman suggest a voice should provide. Instead, the voice emphasized lack, the paucity of a Talmadge tied to a single voice in comparison to the richness of a Talmadge with many imagined voices.

No longer could the audience maintain the fiction that Talmadge had the versatility to portray Norma-hai and Polly Pearl. The silent cinema was able to maintain the fiction that Talmadge’s various roles were expressions from an authentic psychological interior.21 Sound added new information that made it extraordinarily difficult to maintain such a fluid persona. The sound cinema therefore abandoned such versatility just as it eventually abandoned blackface. Such techniques foregrounded the artifice behind the persona, which is difficult to recuperate within the conventions of realistic cinema (Rogin, “Blackface” 451).22

The arrival of sound changed the conditions of representation for all film stars as they struggled to give voice to their established personas. Talmadge was not unique in having to deal with this crisis. Norma Talmadge’s foregrounded versatility, however, accentuates and complicates this general crisis. Her star image in her films and in popular discourse simultaneously straddles melodramatic access and aloofness, the contradictions of New Womanhood, and a range of exotic Others. More than any other actress of comparable popularity in the 1920s, Talmadge exploited the silent cinema’s capacity to maintain this level of fluidity. Had Talmadge persisted in making films, perhaps she might have created a new image. The star image she created, however, could not be maintained in the sound era, for her persona was made possible by the silent cinema and its unique capability for a persona to transcend an individual voice.

The studios seemed to have learned a lesson from the commercial and critical failure of Talmadge’s talkies. Not until after the decline of the Hollywood studio was another actor allowed to create a star persona that straddled so many different class and ethnic positions.22 Actresses were closely tied to a core persona, particularly those like Garbo who had distinctively marked voices.23 Not until much later would another set of discourses allow another female star (Meryl Streep) to foreground versatility across ethnic lines, and this versatility became possible only through the discipline and control of the female voice. Talmadge was silenced, at least in part, by the power of the versatile, melodramatic persona she created, using the unique potential of the silent cinema.24

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Notes

1 For instance, Adolph Zukor said, “The one great tragedy of sound was John Gilbert, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s sensational romantic star. His voice was too high—not effeminate, but with a piping note that all the efforts of the voice instructors could not bring into line with his screen appearance. His failure upset him emotionally and doubtless had much to do with his early death” (173). Perhaps the most famous myth concerning a silent star who was displaced by sound cinema does not involve a real actor at all but a fictional one: Lina Lamont in Singin’ in the Rain (1952).

2 Anita Loos tells the following anecdote: after Du Barry—Woman of Passion received unfavorable reviews, Talmadge’s sister Constance sent her a telegram saying, “Quit pressing your luck, baby. The critics can’t knock those trust funds Mom set up for us.” According to Loos, “Norma took that sisterly advice and gave up acting forever” (2).

3 It is always difficult to know with any degree of certainty why a single historical individual performs an action, but there are several potential factors that explain why Talmadge quit after two talkies. Talmadge had separated from her husband-producer, and any attempt at transacting business between them must have been very awkward. She was a savvy investor who had enough money from her success to retire comfortably. Talmadge was 33 in 1930, and surely the traditional Hollywood pressures on “aging” actresses must have been applied.

In addition, Talmadge had a strong Brooklyn accent. This alone cannot explain Talmadge’s failure in the talkies, however, since there is virtually no trace of this accent in her sound films. Talmadge had to work very hard with a voice teacher to rework her voice (Biery 80). Sound films added a new level of difficulty for this Brooklyn actress’s job. One must also remember the climate of fear in Hollywood’s acting community in the late 1920s. Ramouses ambivalence concerning whether or not stars would be able to make the transition to sound. Certainly these considerations begin to explain why Talmadge’s historical individual did not continue to make sound films into the 1930s.

4 Abbott’s article summarizes the philosophy of the New Woman in an extraordinary credo of contradictions: “I believe in woman’s rights; but I believe in woman’s sacrifices also. I believe in woman’s freedom; but I believe it should be within the restrictions of the Ten Commandments. I believe in woman’s suffrage; but I believe many other things are vastly more important. I believe in woman’s brains; but I believe still more in her emotions. I believe in woman’s assertion of self; but I believe also in her obligation of service to her family, her neighbors, her nation and her God. Following that faith we have the most modern expression of feminism. The newest new woman defies not herself, but through her new freedom, re-defies others.” The signifier “New Woman” keeps reappearing in American popular usage every few decades or so (in the 1940s and 1970s). Remarkably, these “new” New Women bear much resemblance to their predecessors, emphasizing a contradictory combination of business ambition and domestic fulfillment.

4 Stanley Cavell (25–29) suggests that screen actors do not create characters as much as they create social types. See also Dyer (Stars 53–68), who calls the New Woman of the 1920s one of the precursors of the “independent woman” of the 1930s and 1940s.

5 The story of how Talmadge rose to leading player status in the teens is not addressed in this article. The focus here is on the 1920s, when Talmadge’s star image was popular, well established, and relatively stable.

6 A Talmadge clipping file is located at the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research. The file consists primarily of the donations of a single collector, who unfortunately was a fan and not an archivist. Consequently, few of the clippings have complete bibliographic citations. I hope that the enormous value of these materials will outweigh the lack of specificity in the citations. Whenever possible, the type of publication in which a quotation appeared (fan magazine, publicly release, newspaper) is mentioned in the text.

7 The melodrama and the woman’s film are distinguished in this article. The woman’s film is taken to be a historically specific term applied to a cycle of Hollywood films targeted specifically at women. Such films featured female protagonists of feminine background and points of view and were often adapted from other forms of popular culture that appealed to women, such as magazines and pulp novels.

8 Melodrama is defined as a narrative mode that appears in many different media and is a term that has undergone significant change historically. The woman’s film is not a subset of the melodrama. For instance, the woman’s film can also be realistic, as Maria LaPlace argues concerning Now, Voyager; however, many woman’s films (including Talmadge’s) communicate primarily in the melodramatic mode.

Some Talmadge films are best understood as melodramas but not as woman’s films. Such historical melodramas as The Eternal Flame (1922, adapted from Balzac) and Du Barry—Woman of Passion (1930, adapted from a Belasco stage play) have little bearing on the primarily domestic concerns of the woman’s film in its heyday (the 1930s and 1940s).

7 The can be no absolute line drawn between the melodrama and the woman’s film. This article examines Talmadge’s films (some woman’s films, some not) as films that communicate using the melodramatic mode. For further discussion of the relationship between the melodrama and the woman’s film, see Gloddy.

8 Roberta Pearson argues that such a series of performance signs linked with realistic props and glances differentiates a “verisimilar” code of acting from a “histrionic” code. A histrionic soliloquy...
quy would depend on a sequence of Deltsartian stock gestures alone. The verisimile code rooted performance in realistic props, mise-en-scène details, and glance-observe-glance editing to convey a character’s chain of thoughts (38–51). For more on performance and melodrama, see Roberts.

9. Max Mawe argued that the audience also made the best use of emotional “repression,” the ability to keep emotions in check until the right dramatic moment: “She seems invariably to hold much in reserve with the result that when she does let go in a big emotional scene the effect is brought home to the audience with telling force. . . . Her repression seems ever illuminated by the fires of potential emotion” (84).

10. The Eternal Flame (1922) is set in the period of Louis XVIII, Ates of Vengeance (1923) in earlier eighteenth-century France. Others (1924) covers a range of times and settings, including the pioneer West.

11. Just as the melodrama excessively questions the contradictory nature of female sexuality, the exotic narrative foregrounds the contradictions and ambivalences of difference. Both the exotic and the feminine construct positions that simultaneously involve innocence and unbridled sexuality. As Homi Bhabha notes, the exotic Other becomes “an object of desire and decision” (19), both a target and an enchanting provocation. “It is, on the one hand, a topic of learning, discovery, practice; on the other, it is the site of dreams, images, fantasies, myths, obsessions, and requirements” (24). The contradictions of exotic stereotypes compound the contradictions of femininity emphasized in melodrama.

12. Pickford, an actress who later adapted former Talmadge vehicles (Secrets, Kiki) for herself, tried to vary her roles during the 1920s, but her audience begged for her to return to her tried and true persona (Balo 165–67).

13. James Naremore argues that Gish was versatile, suggesting that, although she tended to play a series of similar child-women, her performances-within- performances opened up many possible “selves” (99–121). Talmadge defined her versatility differently, emphasizing the differences between roles (from film to film, or in multiple roles in the same film), not the different “possible selves” within a single role. This strategy foregrounded her versatility both in publicity and in the films themselves.

14. This may be partially explained by certain economic factors. Using versatile actors in multiple roles within the same film was more characteristic of production in the teens, when ensembles of actors portrayed different characters as a time-saving and money-saving device (which also incidentally emphasized actor versatility). As capital expenditures rose at the major studios in the 1920s as a way to increase production values, film productions moved away from this old-fashioned and highly noticeable cost-saving measure. Talmadge worked in her own independent production company (releasing her films in the late 1920s through United Artists), which permitted some variation from the production norms at major studios. In an independent production environment, she could continue to emphasize the flexibility she had learned at Vitagraph long after the rest of the studio had settled on consistent star personas as Pickford’s little Mary.

15. More research needs to be done on star image as it relates to ethnicity, gender, and acting versatility in the transition era to sound. Lon Chaney similarly emphasized his versatility, though his performances were ghettoized by the horror genre. Mynna Loy made the transition to sound by changing from a minor actress who played a range of exotic temptresses to a major star with a unified, more upscale persona. Warner Oland portrayed a Chinese Bom Chronicles and supporting character actor in both silent and sound cinema. Anna Mae Wong continued to play ethnic roles into the sound era, though she did so silently.

16. Bertoletti, who may be the only other major female melodrama star to aspire to Talmadge’s influence, made her debut in the early 1910s and continued to work in the industry until the 1930s.

17. In Da Barry—Woman of Passion, for instance, Talmadge occasionally slips into a lower-class accent. For instance, the line “Aw, surely you know how it is, a great, big, handsome man like you,” is drawn out, almost verging on a faux southern accent. Such an accent would have been the norm in Talmadge’s films in many markets. The famous “Garbo talks!” advertisements ran side by side with Talmadge’s ads, ironically juxtaposing two different fates of two ethnically Othered actresses (one who emphasized her foreign accent and her distance, the other who disavowed her accent and foregrounded her accessibility).

18. As discussed by Douglas Gomery. The innovation of sound did not simply add new potential to the cinema, however. It also brought about a lessening of the expressive possibilities of the film medium (for instance, the loss of control over negative developing when automatic processing supplanted the rack-and-wash method) (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 284–85). Rudolf Arnheim argued that “it was precisely the absence of speech that made the silent film develop a style of its own” (199–230).

19. Peter Brooks argues that muteness occupies a privileged position in melodrama and that therefore silent cinema was considered to be much more suited to the expression of melodrama than the talkies. The system of gestures comprise a “text of muteness,” which is better able to express the ineffable than words can (56–80).

20. Dyer suggests that “independent women” stars have the potential to emphasize their own artifice, to stress that their roles are merely roles (668).

21. For a discussion of how studios used cohesive star personas as an economic strategy for product differentiation, see Klapraet.

22. Coincidentally, Garbo’s much anticipated first Hollywood talkie, Anna Christie, played side by side with Talmadge’s films in many markets.

23. The famous “Garbo talks!” advertisements ran side by side with Talmadge’s ads, ironically juxtaposing two different fates of two ethnically Othered actresses (one who emphasized her foreign accent and her distance, the other who disavowed her accent and foregrounded her accessibility).

Works Cited


YOU’LL SEE IT JUST AS I SAW IT: VOYEURISM, FETISHISM, AND THE FEMALE SPECTATOR IN LADY IN THE LAKE

CATHERINE WILLIAMSON

A while back, I lent my copy of Lady in the Lake (1947) to a friend who shares my interest in feminist film theory. Lady in the Lake is moderately famous in cinema history for its experimentation with extended first-person point of view: most of the film is shot as if the spectator is watching the inanimate events through the eyes of the main character, Phillip Marlowe. I wanted my friend to see the film because it seemed to invite certain questions about spectatorship and cinematic address with which we were then struggling. When she returned the tape, she said with a chuckle, “Talk about the male gaze!”

Almost every feminist film critic who asks questions about spectatorship must talk about the male gaze, must begin with Laura Mulvey’s groundbreaking article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” and her thesis that in cinema, man is the bearer of the look and woman its object (62). Mulvey argues that the gaze in classical cinema is coded as male through the alignment of the separate looks of the (male) protagonist, the camera, and the audience: the combination of pleasurable looking and a pleasurable object to look at is endlessly fascinating to the psychic mechanisms of the male spectator.

After Mulvey’s words were published, other feminist critics began to ask questions about the female spectator—a construct painfully absent from Mulvey’s analysis. Some have theorized about the female response not just to patriarchal Hollywood cinema, but to classical films that overtly address a female audience, such as the “woman’s films” of the 1930s and 40s. Others have investigated how different genres or even different media construct moments of female address and how male and female spectators might respond to such moments.

My return to these issues is motivated by a study of cinematic technique. Lady in the Lake is not unique in its experimentation with point of view; the extended first-person camera has been used frequently in Hollywood cinema in smaller doses, often with much success. Generally the “I-camera” signifies a heightened state of instability in the character whose vision is represented. In Dark Passage (1947), however, the extended first-person camera records a fugitive’s escape from prison; Possessed (1947) shows us the view of a woman having a mental breakdown; the slashing films of the 1970s and 80s use the “I-camera” during psychotic episodes and/or killing sprees. Even Risky Business (1983) successfully uses the technique to convey the heady thrill of independence the Tom Cruise character feels as his parents leave town. As used in Lady in the Lake, however, the technique does not signify the despair, hysteria, psychosis, or even joy experienced by Phillip Marlowe; rather, it is used to enable the spectator the opportunity to step into the diegesis as a tough, cool, male private eye.

Lady in the Lake would seem like an odd choice of a text for a feminist reading. Unlike other classical Hollywood films, its address does not leave much room for the