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Importing Modern Venus

Hollywood, Starlets, and the Czech Star System of the early-to-mid 1930s

The relationships between Hollywood and young American womanhood, especially in the years after the coming of sound, have drawn a significant amount of scholarly attention. A number of studies have emphasized the extent to which, by virtue of their public visibility and their apparent sexual and intellectual autonomy, Hollywood's female stars embodied the "New Woman".[1] This figure surfaced on the silver screen in such sexually-charged and attention-grabbing forms as the vamp and the flapper.[2] Where the exoticism of the former is widely understood as a manifestation of western fears of non-white female sexuality, the latter is generally seen to strike a balance between light-heartedness and sexiness vis-a-vis beautification, fashion, and lifestyle,[3] combining sexual and social rebellion with "girl next door" innocence. Youth was central to both figures, even though the term "teenager" had yet to be coined, as neither of them accommodated markers of aging, not even positive ones such as elegance and grace.[4] Although it is difficult to assign a specific

1) The concept of the New Woman emerged in industrialized countries at the turn of the nineteenth century in relation to several images of rebelious womanhood such as suffragists, anarchists, and flappers. The concept reflected the growing number of middle- and working-class women embracing new and more publically visible roles. See Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*. (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 78.

2) This figure previously appeared in a series of Charles Dana Gibson illustrations published in *Life* magazine. The Gibson Girl presented a romanticized vision of the New Woman. Beautiful and idealised, she pointed to supposed female limitations vis-a-vis sports, education, and masculine dress. See Ibid., p. 85–99. For more on flappers see for example Sara Ross, 'Good little bad girls: controversy and the flapper comedienne', *Film History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (2001), pp. 409–423.

3) On the relationships between lifestyle and modern womanhood as promoted by Hollywood's stars and starlets, particularly in terms of the importance of leisure and consumption, see Joanne Hershfield, 'The Hollywood movie star and the Mexican chica moderna', in Rachel Moseley (ed.), *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2005), pp. 98–108.

4) See for example Report from Newcastle Revisiting Star Studies Conference, < http://www.necsus-ejms.org/revisiting-star-studies-12-14-june-2013-newcastle-university/> [accessed 12 April 2014].

age to vamps and flappers, their make-up and revealing clothing certainly suggests women in their twenties, an age very much congruent with youth.

When considering the young performers who embodied these youthful types, we need to recognize fundamental differences between these "starlets" and their more established counterparts, stars. Conceptually, the starlet is presented as an industry newcomer who, through a combination of intensive promotion and good fortune, has achieved sufficient professional success to bring her to the cusp of fame.[5] Rather than being associated with a new film role, she is more likely to be positioned as an off-screen presence about to receive her big break. The star, on the other hand, is presented as having ascended to a position of power and status on the back of creative labor exerted over a lengthy period of time.[6] Differences between stars and starlets are also historically specific. As exemplified by the countless close-ups of actresses like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo, the face was central to Classical Hollywood star images.[7] And, while costuming played a key role, the bodies of such actresses remained largely hidden from view.[8] By contrast, the spectacle of the visible female figure was central to images of 1930s starlets, who were often pictured outdoors, either relaxing or playing sports in revealing outfits like swimming costumes, short trousers, and low-cut dresses.[9] This emphasis on close-ups imbued the star with a degree of polish and sophistication, which contrasted with the more "natural" feeling of the young, active female body captured in medium shots. The transition between these two types of shot was therefore central to an actress's development from starlet to fully-fledged star. It entailed a shift from appearing merely to be captured by the camera to playing directly to it, through such valued techniques as impersonation and personification. Finally, the transition from starlet to star was completed by the act of speaking, as the star complemented the primarily visual nature of the starlet with a voice that might showcase singing, an educated accent and vocabulary, enlightened views, and the capacity to convey agency through the very act of talking.

The ways in which Hollywood's youthful star images were appropriated and recalibrated overseas have also been examined by several scholars.[10] For example, the local negotiation of imported star images is central to a study by Neepa Majumdar, in which she argues that, from the 1930s to the 1950s, a combination of Hollywood star images and nationalistic impulses drove the proliferation in Indian audiovisual culture of the "cultured lady"; this culturally powerful construct stood as an epitome of stardom, and served as a vehicle through which female public visibility could be negotiated.[11] Meanwhile,

5) On fame versus stardom see Catharine Lumby, 'Doing it for themselves? Teenage Girls, sexuality and fame', in Sean Redmond and Sue Holmes (eds), *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), pp. 341–352.

6) See for example Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London: Continuum, 2000), pp. 82–109.

7) See for example Roland Barthes, 'The Face of Garbo', in *Stardom and Celebrity*, pp. 261–262.

8) See Charlotte Cornelia Herzog and Jane Marie Gaines, 'Puffed Sleeves before Tea Time: Joan Crawford, Adrian and women audiences', in Christine Gledhill (ed.), *Stardom: Industry of Desire* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 74–91.

9) Ibid.

10) Hershfield, 'The Hollywood Movie Star and the Mexican Chica Moderna'.

11) Neepa Majumdar, *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only! Female Stardom and Cinema in India 1930–1950s* (Urbana, IL, and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

Erica Carter has argued that the partial modeling of Third Reich stars on their Hollywood counterparts generated tensions between authenticity and excess, artistry and craft, and generality and specificity.[12] Studies such as these suggest that we might enrich our understandings of how the Czech film production and publishing industries of the 1930s negotiated imported images of Hollywood's young female stars.[13] The interplay of discourses pertaining to stardom, womanhood, and beauty influenced both talent scouting and the circulation of star images in this country. As understandings of stardom in Czechoslovakia have derived mainly from case studies of individual actresses' career histories,[14] this topic may also be developed by studies that focus on the structure and production of star images within this particular context.

Accordingly, this essay shows that imported images of Hollywood starlets were largely embraced in early-1930s Czechoslovakia, especially within publishing and film industrial circles. Their mainly positive reception, I argue, led to attempts to fashion similar images of, and around, Czech starlets, as new film magazines were used to disseminate pictures of aspiring young actresses in a manner indebted to such American archetypes as the chorus girl, the pin-up, and Hollywood stars. The appeal of young modern womanhood lay in its supposedly democratic underpinnings; practically anyone with the requisite looks and talent could make it, irrespective of class, nationality, connections, and experience. Press discourse frequently offered readers a chance to break into the movies through photo contests, thereby deepening the talent pool for the production sector. Accordingly, the essay opens by considering the representational practices of the film magazine *Kinorevue*, before examining how these practices shaped the Czech film industry's recruitment and promotion of young female talent. In so doing, I hope to enrich understandings of Czech film stardom in the early 1930s in a manner that promises also to offer transferable insights that might deepen our knowledge of other nations' relationships to Hollywood star images. Across Europe, countless creative industry personnel, intellectuals, and artists saw American culture as a force capable of liberating them from the limitations of national heritage. They saw in Hollywood stars the promise of replicable models of physical perfection and reminders of the possibility of social and economic upward mobility. This essay therefore invites scholars to consider not only the reception of youthful star images but also the process of manufacturing these starlets in various national popular and artistic cultural productions.

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12) Erica Carter, 'Marlene Dietrich — The Prodigal Daughter', in Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, Deniz Gokturk (eds), *The German Cinema Book* (London: BFI Publishing, 2008), pp. 71–80.

13) This essay follows standard practice by using the term "Czech", as opposed to "Czechoslovak", film industry and film culture because, prior to World War Two, Prague served as the center of film production, distribution, and exhibition. See for example Petr Szczepanik, *Konzervy se slovy. Počátky zvukového filmu a česká mediální kultura 30. let* (Brno: Host, 2009).

14) See *Iluminace*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2012). In particular see Šárka Gmiterková, 'Filmová ctnost je blond: Jiřina Štěpničková (1930–1945)', pp. 45–67; Vladimíra Chytilová, 'Olga Schoberová, filmová hvězda v kontextu československé kinematografie 60. let', pp. 87–112. The case of Štěpničková highlights the connections between stage and screen stardom in their interwar years, showing how appropriate femininity, notions of acting quality, social prestige, and citizenship were articulated in these arenas. The case of the 1960s bombshell Olga Schoberová marked a shift away from the facets exemplified by Štěpničková toward notions of youth, beauty, style, and sexual allure that reflected the liberalization of 1960s Czechoslovakia.

In need of young talent

The early-to-mid 1930s was a transitional period for the Czech film industry, especially in terms of the state's funding of films. With the coming of sound, this small national cinema faced a number of challenges. For one, the talkies tripled production budgets, due to the cost of implementing new technologies during shooting, postproduction, and exhibition. What is more, this additional expense was not offset by a comparable increase in box office returns on the domestic market. With an average of twenty five releases annually, only two tended to generate sufficient revenue to cover production costs. It was estimated that Czech films lost an average of CZK 162,000.[15]

Deeming films to be culturally significant objects in spite of their economic shortcomings, the Czech government decided partially to underwrite production in the country.[16] Yet, because its contributions amounted to only one quarter of a film's production costs, industry decision makers were required to secure additional sources of financing. For one, even though most Czech producers were well aware of the limited commercial potential of exporting their films, the popular success of C. A K. Polní Maršálek (1930) in its German-speaking target markets gave the industry a reason to be optimistic. While penetrating international markets promised to increase revenue, this film also highlights the deeper connections between the Czech and German markets, in terms of shared audience preferences and cultural practices. While Czech moviegoers tended to prefer films in their own language, they also gravitated en masse to some Hollywood imports, first talkies and by 1935 star vehicles.[17] The biggest draws on the Czech market were the Swedish-born Greta Garbo with five hit films to her name, and the Frenchman Maurice Chevalier with two. Drawing on the model of Hollywood stardom therefore offered Czech industry insiders a practical method of breaking into foreign markets.

The limited contributions made by the state also encouraged Czech filmmakers to develop commercially-oriented approaches to motion picture content. For example, in 1935, Miloš Havel, an influential producer-distributor and the owner of Barrandov studios, suggested that "[...] to make Czech cinema healthy again we must take greater responsibility when selecting subject matter, developing screenplays, and recruiting above-the-line talent".[18] Producers therefore fashioned screenplays that centralized genres and topics which promised to appeal to a sizable audience at home and ideally abroad. Crucially, Czech producers also saw casting, especially the cultivation of a homegrown star system, as central to their financial wellbeing. However, their attempts to systematize talent scouting, based on a highly subjective view of Hollywood practice, clashed with the rather informal nature of Czech film elite circles, where belonging to a certain clique and frequenting the right cafés was of utmost importance.[19] This clash resulted in starlets failing to develop into fully fledged stars.

15) Szczepanik, *Konzervy se slovy*, p. 39.
16) Ibid., p. 42.
17) Ibid., pp. 273–274.
18) Translation: "Ozdravení československého filmu má předpokladem odpovědnější výběr námětů, pečlivější zpracování scénářů a rozšíření sboru hereckého a režisérského. Po stránce technické a výrobně organisační je vše v pořádku". Jiří Havelka, *Československé filmové hospodářství 1929–1934* (Praha: Čefis, 1935), p. X.
19) For a detailed discussion see Petr Szczepanik, "'Machři" a "Diletanti". Základní jednotky filmové praxe

The mid 1930s were a good time to develop emerging stars, as the Czech cultural industries were becoming increasingly interested in capitalizing on the phenomenon of youth. Since the 1920s, this nation's theater sector had incorporated avant-garde trends, including those associated with Meyerhold theatre and the principles of comedia dell arte, in terms of prioritizing physical expression.[20] Even the illustrious National Theater embraced experimental practices, employing a troupe of young performers experienced in this type of performance.[21] In addition to prestigious institutions seeking to increase their cultural cache, light entertainment enterprises demanded young, physically fit performers for leading roles and especially background choruses. Revue operettas in particular were dominated by spectacularly orchestrated dance numbers centralizing large troupes of chorines or "girls", as they were often called at this time.[22] The sense of an international standard of feminine identity that was summoned by leaving the term "girls" un-translated also emerged in film magazines. It is clear that by the early-to-mid 1930s the concept of the girl was understood across the developed world as one derived from American cultural artifacts but ultimately adaptable to other national contexts. Therefore, *Kinorevue* could state that "Girls were invented in America"[23] but still publish similar images from Czech, German, French, and Japanese sources.[24] The broad visibility and international appeal of the girl therefore highlighted the existence of an element of content that promised to be easily exportable. This potential was further enhanced by the assumption that regular moviegoers and film buffs tended to be quite young themselves, and would therefore gravitate to films which featured talent of a similar age.[25]

The theater was thus seen to provide the Czech film industry with a solution to one of its biggest challenges: a dearth of young screen actors. The stage would provide a talent pool from which film producers could draw younger performers. Another solution to this problem was offered by the popular press. Film magazines posited an easily applicable model of youth stardom, one derived from a local understanding of the ways Hollywood constructed star images. The latter brought with it the challenge of adapting American models to local cultural dispositions however. It needs stressing that the Czech star system did not correspond fully to Richard deCordova's model of stardom, whereby stars are seen to offer public access to an actor's biographical legend and "private" informa-

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v době reorganizací a politických zvratů 1945 až 1962', in Pavel Skopal (ed.), *Naplánovaná kinematografie. Český filmový průmysl 1945 až 1960* (Praha: Aacademia, 2012), pp. 27–101.

20) For a thorough overview of theatrical trends of the period see František Černý, *Dějiny* českého *divadla IV.* Činoherní *divadlo v* Československé *republice a za nacistické okupace* (Praha: Academia, 1983); Jan Císař, *Přehled dějin* českého *divadla II, 1862–1945* (Praha: AMU, 2004).

21) Between 1925 and 1930 the National Theatre employed promising young talent such as Jiřina Štěpničková, Jarmila Horáková, Ladislav Pešek, Ladislav Boháč, and Jiřina Šejbalová, some of whom were the first performers to develop concurrent film and stage careers.

22) Operettas are lighter, more comical versions of prestigious operas. Revue operettas were then-popular updates of traditional versions of the genre. See Miroslav Šulc, *Česká operetní kronika 1863–1945. Vyprávění a fakta* (Praha: Divadelní ústav 2002).

23) *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 16 (1934), pp. 305–6.

24) See Czech "Jenčík Girls", *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 27 (1935), p. 8; "Japanese girls posing on a beach", *Kinorevue*, vol.1, no. 25 (1935), p. 492; "A group of French girls", *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 13 (1934), p. 241.

25) Markéta Lošťáková, *Čtenáři filmu — diváci časopisu. České filmové publikum v letech 1918–1938* (Příbram: Pistorius & Olšanská, 2012), pp. 73–95.

tion.[26] In this respect, Czech stars perhaps better exemplified what deCordova called the picture personality, without ever truly attaining the status of bona fide stars, precisely because of a lack of "private" information about them entering into the public sphere. Substituting for the absence of such information was the positioning of Czech film stars as artistes. This facet derived largely from their associations with legitimate theater; the majority of Czech film stars not only started their careers on the stage but usually continued working there after they started appearing on the silver screen. Various national and cultural discourses imbued the Czech theater with a genuine sense of heritage and respectability, which in turn exerted a profound influence on the manner in which the personae of Czech stars were seen at this time. Where Hollywood starlets were widely perceived as attractive yet superficial and unreachable, indigenous stars were typically promoted on their talent, beauty, and charisma.

Stars and starlets in the discourse of Kinorevue

A popular film weekly launched in September 1934, *Kinorevue* sought to nurture closer relationships between film stars and fans. Like its American equivalents, most of the news and profiles published in this magazine tended to reproduce film industry positions and rhetoric. The "official biographies" featured therein often blurred the lines between a star's persona and the personality of the character s/he played in a particular film, insofar as biographical narratives echoed key elements of the storylines of their latest star vehicles.

Kinorevue conceptualized stardom around two pairs of contrasting ideas related to visibility and age; the distinction between the Czech and the international star, and between the star and the starlet. Czech stars were seen primarily as artistes, on account of their being framed as supremely talented individuals, on their projecting an air of national authenticity based on speaking Czech and their physical appearances, and on their conveying a sense of personal substance and depth due to their professional mastery, beauty, everydayness, and accessibility. By contrast, Hollywood stars were seen to possess an almost otherworldly quality, on account of their romantic and luxurious lifestyle, their air of superiority, and their sophistication, elegance, and charisma. The term star itself was reserved for Czech leading ladies that journalists considered marketable, and who could pursue professional activities outside Czechoslovakia.[27] Czech stars were nevertheless treated with reverence, in contrast to their American counterparts, who were usually pre-

26) This definition is offered by Richard deCordova, who suggests that film stardom was developed in three stages in the United States: from a discourse on acting through to the picture personality and finally to the star. These phases also describe the general trajectory of a performer who achieves the status of a star. The discourse tied up with stardom allows for private information such as romance, familial ties, and scandals to enter into the public sphere. Such mediated and publicly consumed images may not accurately or fully reflect the "authentic" self of the star, but pleasure can lie in this illusion of access. See Richard deCordova, *Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America* (Champaigne, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

27) With the exception of the first homegrown star in the 1920s, Anny Ondra who worked in the German film industry, and Lída Baarová, who enjoyed a promising start in that country, no Czech stars actively pursued an international career in the 1930s.

sented in a slightly ironic way that allowed for doubts about their performance skills and private personalities to be countered in publicity materials. Nevertheless, from beneath this form of image management surfaced a clear admiration for Hollywood's apparent systematic and successful cultivation of internationally embraced on-screen performers. Starlets however, whether Czech or American, were firmly rooted to the bottom of the pecking order. These young women were effectively excluded from prestigious columns such as biographical portraits, because they were mainly presented as anonymous performers. Yet, they could be found regularly adorning fashion pages and articles on beauty and lifestyle. For example, in an article entitled "Swimwear Season", photographs of starlets featured alongside text describing Joan Crawford's and Greta Garbo's bathing suits.[28] In *Kinorevue*, American starlets projected the notion of Hollywood as a site of eternal springtime, leisure, and sport. In many cases, this notion stood in marked contrast to Czech discourses on stardom, which emphasized that focus, discipline, and hard work were needed to maintain this professional standing.

The presentation of Hollywood starlets also largely characterized their Czech sisters, although the latter were invariably named by the press. Czech starlets were introduced to the public by way of one- or two-sentence captions, a photograph, and notification of their upcoming motion pictures debuts.[29] Such an approach spotlighted selected experiences of individual starlets, and accentuated their physical assets. For example, Eliška Pleyová, who came from the fashion industry, was introduced in a studio photo sporting a bathing suit (Figure 1).[30] Julka Staňková was also presented in swimwear, but in an apparent outdoor snapshot (Figure 2).[31] Marta Fričová, however, was captured dancing, alongside a reference to the growing popularity of her film dancing school, thereby invoking the nature of her talent.[32] Other promotional stills focused on the faces of particularly photogenic starlets. A specific category of talent scouting existed which offered readers the opportunity to break into the film industry; however, these were geared less to the needs of film producers than to increasing the magazine's circulation, based on the opportunities they appeared to offer fame-hungry girls and women. Newcomers recruited from the readership of *Kinorevue* could in principle be employed either as screenwriters or as starlets. Potential starlets were evaluated on the photographs they submitted, but which the magazine's editors tended to relegate to readers' letters pages. In reality, these photos were just another attraction for the magazine, offering, as they did, little chance for a would-be starlet to actually break into the business.[33]

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28) 'Sezona plavek', *Kinorevue*, vol. 2, no. 41 (1936), pp. 290–291.

29) As much as it seemed to reflect the dominant imported strategies of promoting starlets, not all young Czech screen talent was presented in this way. This being said, the motivation behind the various approaches remains unclear.

30) *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 46 (1935), p. 393.

31) *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 46 (1935), p. 387

32) In the case of this particular photograph, as well as other images centralizing female subjects, it is possible to see evidence of broader cultural influences, such as avant-garde photography, modern dance techniques, and experimental theater. However, because they appeared in a section dedicated to educating of non-professional filmmakers, these images were effectively excluded from the main part of *Kinorevue*.

33) Lošťáková, *Čtenáři filmu — diváci časopisu*, pp. 90–95.

Fig. 1. Eliška Pleyová posing in a bathing suit (*Kinorevue*)

Fig. 2. Julka Staňková pictured outdoors (*Kinorevue*)

More so than any other film magazine, *Kinorevue* printed countless photographs, making it an ideal site for the naturalization of Hollywood imagery in Czechoslovakia during the interwar years. Between 1934 and 1936, production stills from upcoming Hollywood films, chorus girls (usually from Eddie Cantor movies), and pin-ups appeared regularly on the pages of this magazine. Such images either captured a group of girls performing ornate routines or honed in on a specific girl who was being given a professional push. Where pin-up aesthetics informed the presentation of those starlets who exuded a hint of sexual magnetism or individuality, chorus girl heritage placed an emphasis on styling and physicality. Limiting our focus solely to the image of the single starlet allows us to trace a complex set of negotiations between interchangeability and uniqueness, between the visible and the concealed, and between artificiality and naturalness.

The pin-up provided a key visual reference point when Czech starlets were introduced to the public. Beyond its popular status as a "cheesecake" shot adorning countless American G.I.s' walls or fighter planes, the pin-up represented a publicly displayed and publicly consumed exemplar of feminine portraiture, one in which the pin-up's isolation from men lent itself to both a male and a female gaze.[34] Sexuality was always already im-

34) See Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls*, pp. 1–26.

Fig. 3. Anonymous Modern Venus (*Kinorevue*)

plicit in these snapshots and in the full body images, but it was rarely explicit, the revealing nature of the images notwithstanding. Their invocation of the pin-up imbued the Czech girls with some of the values and meanings ascribed to American youth. Their intimidating physiques, which Johanna Frueh insightfully describes as a monster/beauty, [35] coupled with their apparent self-confidence, lent these young women a measure of sexual allure. Chorus girls or troupes of young women delivering intricately choreographed dance routines, on the other hand, connoted a sense of collective identity. Siegfried Kracauer has aptly described these girls as an exemplary product of what he called "American distraction factories",[36] while noting that their geometrically precise performances were sufficiently accessible to be enjoyed across the globe. Their performances involved myriad female bodies partially covered by bathing suits, albeit with the potential sexuality and sensuality of these displayed bodies minimized by the collective nature of the performance. The visible parts of the dancers' bodies — their arms, legs, and torsos — were presented in such a way as to offer the viewer a distinct visual arrangement.[37] What emerges here is the calculated and mechanical character of a choreography that approximates that of the classical Hollywood star system, especially in terms of the talent scouting described in *Kinorevue*. The magazine often compared Hollywood's organization of creative labor to a factory; to a standardized process designed to deliver predictable and satisfactory results. Its articles typically presented Hollywood in a playful, slightly ironic tone, and sought to undermine the glamorous aspects of the accompanying photographs. Critiques tended to be subtle; gestures to the petulance, grandiosity, vanity and superficiality of certain tinsel town "divas" only became truly apparent in the context of their Czech counterparts presentation as authentic and dedicated artistes. The pictured American starlets were usually buttressed by commentary that highlighted their symmetrical beauty, slimness, discipline, and healthy lifestyles involving sports and other outdoor activities. Beautification, dieting, and physical training were seen as aspects of working life, but

35) Joanna Frueh, *Monster/Beauty: Building the Body of Love* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001).

36) Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 75–76.

37) Kracauer's assumption that cultural production invariably mirrors contemporaneous ideological undercurrents may be questionable, but his description of the dance performances and the look of the girls are in this case is sound, I maintain.

a strong accent was also placed on leisure. Thus, a fairly typical series of photographs showed a young woman posing on a beach and striking statuesque poses while undertaking various physical activities, including tennis and working out at the gym. One of the captions that accompanied these images read: "Modern Venus: After a long day in the studio, a shapely movie starlet unwinds at the beach with the sun, sea, and cooling breeze" (see Figure 3).[38]

Kinorevue therefore posited a somewhat schizophrenic and unattainable sense of female beauty, which was offered as a prerequisite for those aspiring to become starlets themselves. In this respect, beauty was frequently considered in terms of geometry; symmetry, proportions, and "adequate" measurements. It was also constructed around expertise, both in terms of marketing operations and the democratization of stardom, wherein even the brightest stars had physical flaws which needed "correcting" with cosmetics such as creams and make-up. After the emergence of affordable beauty products after World War I, the feminine ideal could not be attained without the aid of the cosmetic industry — the natural needed to be modified with various touch-ups. For example, one article centered on Katharine Hepburn's purported attempts to remove freckles from her face. Lastly, female beauty was constructed around notions of strict physical self-discipline related to dieting and the sculpting of a fit, lithe body. These elements were more or less attainable; however, the conferral of star status called for additional qualities, which were harder to emulate and sometimes even escaped precise description. This slipperiness related to notions of talent, charm, and above all else, to sex appeal, the combination of which became something of a leitmotif for *Kinorevue*. Sex appeal, which made speaking about sexuality possible at high society events, and in magazines and newspapers, was mystified however. "Sex appeal doesn't need any justification. It can't cease to exist because its bond with our lives is too strong. Sex appeal makes art and our lives meaningful" noted one writer.[39] Such broad and vague definitions echo Kracauer's description of girls losing their sexual allure and their individuality in the context of precisely orchestrated choreography.[40] From their bathing suits and revealing shorts to their outdoor settings and their focus on the body over the face, these promotional materials were clearly inspired by the chorus girl.

The production and education of Czech starlets

Despite their apparently random application, the efforts described above were widespread in the industry, and were closely tied to changes in film importation and the organization of audiovisual culture. One of the institutions that flourished in the mid 1930s by looking

38) Translation: "Moderní Venuše — krásně rostlá, usměvavá filmová hvězda na mořské pláži, kde si v blahodárné lázni vzduchu, slunce a vody uklidňuje nervy, unavené vyčerpávající prací v atelieru" *Kinorevue* vol. 1, no. 44 (1935), p. 345.

39) Translation: "Sex-appeal vůbec nepotřebuje obhajoby. Nemůže zaniknout, protože je příliš silně spjat s naším životem. Je v něm smysl našeho života i smysl věčného umění, které nerozlučně provází" ač, 'Ideální ženská krása a kolik měří…', *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 44 (1935), pp. 344–347.

40) Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament. Weimar Essays*, pp. 76–78.

qualitatively to elevate of domestic film production was the company Filmové Studio, founded in 1934 by Miloš Havel. First and foremost a businessman, Havel set up the company not only as a means of acquiring young talent but above all else as a way of securing state subsidies. These were tied to fulfilling several imperatives, chief among which was the recruitment of filmmakers and actors. In its first two years, Filmové Studio concentrated on searching for photogenic types.[41] The company originally toyed with the idea of making a star out of a newcomer who would be groomed for cinematic stardom. The candidates or "adepts", as they were called, tended to lack acting or performing experience, but Filmové Studio was willing to train them. This educational mission was, however, rather loosely defined. Talent would either be shown films selected by tutors before participating in a discussion or would join the film department of the conservatory.[42]

Across the early 1930s, it was clear that the lack of young screen actors was a major problem for the Czech film production sector. The emergence of sound had precipitated a shakeup of who was deemed to be a top star. Generational shifts had also contributed to this state of affairs. But a hitherto unprecedented premium was now placed on the vocal skills of those aspiring to stardom in sound cinema. Filmové Studio wanted to continue the practice of scouting and grooming talent based on what was widely believed to be the Hollywood standard. *Kinorevue* frequently parlayed the Hollywood approach in the following terms. In Hollywood, strict selective criteria were applied to the vast numbers of aspiring stars; these criteria were based on evaluations of the photogenic potential of the face and body. When a promising starlet was offered a contract, she would undergo a transformative process that accentuated her beauty and personal style, which would then be followed by a series of screen tests. *Kinorevue* claimed that this was a standard process, pointing to Katharine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, and others as evidence of its routinized role in Hollywood. Yet, we should not forget that Czech publicists would have lacked precise information about the Hollywood studio system; about how this institution actually operated. Their interpretation was therefore based on promotional materials that presented the manufacture of stardom as a coherent and replicable formula. This step-by-step process indicated that Hollywood's conceptions of star-making could be employed as a practical "research and development" model.

Even though these ideas about Hollywood's stardom might have been rather ill-informed, Czech producers nevertheless aimed to adapt what they believed to be essential aspects of the star system: selectivity, efficiency, and standardization. As Karel Smrž, a Czech publicist, journalist, and an influential figure at Filmové Studio explained, the number of individuals who made it to the screen was minute in comparison to those who aspired to such a position. "From almost eight hundred applicants only ten percent succeeded in the preliminary test shots", he detailed, adding: "even those ten percent have

41) Inventory no. 14, p. 1, f. Spolek Filmové studio, Oddělení písemných archiválií, Národní filmový archiv (hereafter OPA NFA).

42) This idea evolved into collaborations on short films between trainee directors and novice actors, even though formal filmmaker training institutions only existed in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. Again though, there is no evidence to suggest that this plan was actually put into practice. 'Inventory no. 8, p. 15, f. Spolek Filmové studio, OPA NFA.

only the slimmest of chances of succeeding on screen".[43] Smrž would go on to assert that starlets were usually driven not by a dedication to their craft or to the medium of film, but by the pursuit of fame; a misguided motive, he felt.[44] His position promotes a vision of stardom determined by creative labor and by the long-term pursuit of noble goals such as the cultivation and mastery of one's craft. The search for prospective talent was therefore considered to be a lengthy and exhausting process. Consequently, those starlets who were fortunate enough to be selected would not be treated as mere extras but instead cast in minor roles with some dialogue. In its first year of existence, Filmové Studio regularly conducted screen tests; however, these were abandoned, partly due to financial restraints but mostly to Czech film directors' indifference to screen tests. This indifference was most likely the result of two factors. First, directors did not have the time to shoot them; they were put through grueling schedules with feature films typically needing to be shot in nine to twelve days. Second, the branding of Czech cinema as a cinema of quality incentivized the positioning of its films in relation to elevated culture, which ranged from adapting literary classics, making costume dramas, and drawing upon prestigious topical themes to the recruitment of prestigious human resources such as those with an established career in legitimate theater.

Conclusion

While they may have been short-lived, the practices described above nevertheless represented part of the systematization and consolidation of the Czech cinema in the 1930s. The "contingent system", a means of controlling imports provided support for the domestic film industry. State subsidies led indigenous productions to increase from an average of twenty-three films in the early 1930s to thirty five by the middle of the decade,[45] highlighting two problems: the challenge of producing polished internationally appealing films, and a shortage of screen talent. With the Czech film industry's demand for new talent was only partly met by theater performers transitioning from stage to screen, producers wanted to institutionalize a star system of their own. However, rather than lending themselves to emerging talents, star vehicles were intended to showcase the talents and presence of celebrated stage performers. This situation may have been complicated by the fact that long-term investment in stardom would have undermined the financial security that state subsidies provided the industry. With capital investment in the cultivation of human resources increasing with the act of grooming each new aspiring starlet, producers were ultimately content to limit major speaking roles to a handful of A-listers that included Lída Baarová, Adina Mandlová, and Nataša Gollová.

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43) Translation: "Z téměř osmi set přihlášených adeptů jen asi 10 % obstálo při předběžné zkoušce a bylo filmováno — a i z těchto deseti procent jen malá část má naději, že by se mohla se svými schopnostmi ve filmu uplatnit". Karel Smrž, 'Filmové studio a český film', *Kinorevue*, vol. 1, no. 33 (1935), pp. 121–124.

44) Ibid.

45) Ivan Klimeš, 'Kulturní průmysl a politika. České a rakouské filmové hospodářství v politické krizi třicátých let', in Gernot Heiss and Ivan Klimeš (eds), *Obrazy času. Český a rakouský film 30. let* (Praha, Brno: NFA, 2003), p. 318.

These financial disincentives effectively limited starlets to publicity materials, especially their presentation in *Kinorevue* as personifications of an international vision of young female beauty. There were several reasons for this development. For one, critics dismissed the films in which the starlets appeared as commercially-minded trash, all but ignoring their admittedly minor roles and thus stalling their careers. The starlets of the 1930s also failed to survive in cultural memory, and all copies of a film introducing some of the starlets, POLIBEK VE SNĚHU (1935), are believed lost. Filmové Studio therefore serves as something of a proxy case study, as it was at this company that the systematic cultivation of starlets flourished, for a short time at least. At the outset, Filmové Studio's quest for fresh faces was clearly inspired by "Hollywood machinery"; a notion that was both ridiculed and ironized in Czech film cultural circles, but which was at the same time quietly admired. The Czech film industry was in reality closer in its structure and outlook to the German and Austrian film industries. Consequently, it produced stars that embodied forms of national identity derived from heritage culture such as literary classics, especially the solid, busty "blood and milk" type. However, the images of slender, modern young American womanhood featured in *Kinorevue* were also alluring. The starlets fashioned to this mold, echoed Hollywood archetypes. The emphasis placed on physicality in body-centric photographs of active starlets engaging in outdoor and sporting activities highlighted sexiness and youth. It may have resonated well with young urban audiences, but Czech films generated most of their revenue from small-town and village theaters.[46] These moviegoers demonstrated a preference for a highly valued vision of Czech womanhood based on endurance, self-sacrifice, and chastity that harked back to nineteenth-century literary heroines seen as important symbols of national pride. The influence of this nationally gendered figure was felt well into the twentieth century, when such images conveyed a combination of doe-eyed innocence, mild eroticism, and dramatic suffering, and conjured the figure of the dedicated, serious artiste behind them. While photographs of Hollywood starlets may have provided a pleasant distraction, it might well have been unfeasible to present young Czech actresses in a similar way. The public might not have been offended by such imagery, but in all likelihood it would not have embraced it either. While Hollywood was frequently portrayed as the land of eternal youth and springtime, the Czech audience was probably not ready for Czech starlets who exuded leisure, insouciance, and notions of wellness.

Films Cited:

C. a K. Polní maršálek (Karel Lamač, 1930); *Polibek ve sněhu* (Václav Binovec, 1935).

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46) 'Jak se dělá film. Rozhlasová reportáž z AB akciových filmových továren na Barrandově', *Filmová Politika*, vol. 2, no. 17 (1935), p. 2.

SUMMARY

Importing Modern Venus

Hollywood, Starlets, and the Czech Star System of the early-to-mid 1930s

Šárka Gmiterková

It is generally accepted that, as ambassadors of modern womanhood, Hollywood's youthful stars of the 1930s boasted international appeal. Accordingly, this essay examines the two areas of Czech film culture that benefited most from embracing the American starlet at this time. The first was film magazines like *Kinorevue*, which published numerous photographs of young actresses both form Hollywood and closer to home. The democratic nature of starlets — promising fame to anyone with the requisite looks and talent — attracted readers of a similar age who harbored such ambitions. The second was the newly established Filmové studio, which used Hollywood models as partial templates for grooming the young talents it expected to increase the international appeal of its films. While short-lived, these transatlantic exchanges represented a key part of Czech cinema of the 1930s.